

WHAT TURTLE BLOOD TASTES LIKE

By

John F. Lamb, MS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

Creative Writing and Literary Arts

University of Alaska Anchorage

December 2018

© 2018 John F. Lamb

APPROVED:

Erin Coughlin Hollowell, MFA, Committee Chair

Anne Caston, MFA, Committee Member

Sherry Simpson, MFA, Committee Member

David Stevenson, PhD, CWLA Program Coordinator

Department of English

Timothy Smith, DMA, Associate Dean for Fine Arts and Humanities

College of Arts and Sciences

John Stalvey, PhD, Interim Provost

Graduate School

Abstract

What Turtle Blood Tastes Like explores acts of initiation and the packs we run with: wild boys, family, animal companions. Turtle blood acts as an elixir, opening doors to the muck of childhood, that coursing of heat and blood felt in the ears while walking the edge of right and wrong. In these poems fatherhood and home ownership are impending disasters that complicate the domestic landscape. Origin stories emerge unexpectedly from gardens, in bites of pickled whitefish and the gold foil of butterscotch candy. What routes have led us here, from what seeds have we grown? The critical essay, “Subverting Sentimentality in the Poetry of Parenthood,” scrutinizes elements of craft in contemporary American poetry that unpack tropes and reveal the overlooked undercurrents of parenting.

Table of Contents

	Page
Title Page	i
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
Acknowledgments	ix
Subverting Sentimentality in the Poetry of Parenthood.....	xi
1. Introduction	xi
2. Beyond Theme: Taking Inventory of the Tools	xvi
3. The Awed	xx
4. The Conflicted.....	xxv
5. The Flawed.....	xxxii
6. Conclusion.....	xxxvi
Works Cited	xxxvii
Annotated Bibliography	xxxix
What Turtle Blood Tastes Like	1
What Turtle Blood Tastes Like	3
Going Over	4
Her Story	6
When We Were Winged	7

View from Right.....	8
You Saw Me.....	9
Where God Was	10
Dirt Work	11
Lily Bud.....	13
Sounding.....	14
Ways We Connect.....	15
We Keep the Liquor in the Laundry Room.....	16
All Under.....	17
Scale	18
Lesser Devils	20
Wind God	23
Ways to Say Please	24
Timeless	25
Five and Nine	26
Arrival	28
Uncle	29
Deferred Maintenance	31
What it Was.....	33
It Matters	34

Night School.....	35
Snow Dance.....	36
Keeping Control	37
Undertow	38
On a Kite String.....	40
Before You Ask.....	43
Tree houses, Shipwrecks and Magic	45
Ragged, Loved	47
Ball Jar.....	48
Kaldūnai	50
Exposure.....	54
A Roof.....	55
Brassica Oleracea	57
Fear of Rejection	59
Rounding Outer Point, Douglas Island	60
On the Move.....	61
Anything I can put ketchup on	62
Feared and Afraid.....	63
Killing Cold.....	64
Rise.....	65

Half-Life.....	66
----------------	----

Acknowledgments

A huge high-five to a lifetime of teachers and to my family and friends, you believed in me before I believed in me. Melinda, my pig-tailed partner in crime, your support has made this possible. All your hard work, your patience as a parenting and a partner, has given me the greatest gift, the time to write. Your encouragement, love and wisdom were invaluable in bringing these words into the world. To my peers and the incredible community of Alaskan writers who read early versions of these poems, your suggestions, insights and laughter have helped them grow. I am grateful to the faculty, in particular those who I've had the honor to collide with during my time in orbit: Elizabeth Bradfield, Eva Saulitis, Sean Hill, Bob Hicok, and to my peers in the MFA program at the University of Alaska Anchorage Low Residency MFA, your high-expectations, honesty and galaxies of literary knowledge opened my eyes and mind in the most fulfilling of ways. To my mentors, Zack Rogow, Anne Caston and Erin Coughlin Hollowell (and with a nod to Sherry Simpson) thanks to your guidance I can say with confidence that I'm ready for a lifetime of fourth years.

Subverting Sentimentality in the Poetry of Parenthood

Bringing children into the world, an act one could argue is selfish, even foolish, invites trouble. Again, so does poetry.

—Michael Weigers “The Poet’s Child”

1. Introduction

Any poem that includes babies or children is taking risks. The risk stems primarily from the strong emotions and associations people have towards children that the poem must work against. With babies come certain hard-wired emotional preconceptions and responses that are fraught with sentimentality. In the human brain, autonomic functions and instinct (respiratory rhythm, heartbeat, fear, fight, flight) are controlled by the medulla oblongata, the hindbrain or the reptilian brain. This part of the brain will make humans, even childless adult humans, do things they don’t even want to do out of instinct, such as reach out to comfort an infant for example. If a poet relies on this type of instinctual emotional response, their work can leave readers feeling manipulated and resistant.

Additionally, this type of poetry typically engages a narrow and often exclusive range of cultural and narrative expectations. “A baby in a poem must work hard to operate outside the narrative of birth, the activity of caretaking, the milieu of heteronormativity. If the poem partakes of any of those things, depending on the reader, it courts the sentimentality of expectedness” writes Joy Katz in the essay, “Baby Poetics.” Katz observes specific techniques used by contemporary poets to counter sentimentality: affectless diction, emphasis on isolation instead of awe, use of the plural pronoun “we” to implicate the reader, use of present tense to illustrate the immediateness of parenting, and the placement of a baby in a poem in which the baby is not the subject.

Regardless of the technique used, “the poem has to work hard to do something electric or surprising instead of just being emotionally manipulative, which is another kind of sentimentality” (Katz). For this type of poetry to combat the instinctual, automatic resistance it is likely to encounter, it must sidestep (if possible) too much emphasis on children, parents engaged in any of the cliché acts of parenting (cooing, bathing, diapering, feeding) and provide some insight into the basic humanity of a speaker. In his introduction to *The Poet’s Child*, Michael Wiegers writes, “we are complicated, not-always-loving beings...when faced with the role of parenting”(xiv). And so, the poetry of parenthood must evoke the same depth of insight, to move beyond latching on, first words and first steps to illuminate the raw human struggle and conflict beneath the surface.

Writing in the *Harriet* blog, poet Jeffrey McDaniel describes his encounter with the poetry of parenthood, “one immediate danger with babies and poetry is a kind of delusion kicks in with children...So many people write about their kids, or the experience of having/raising kids, in really bland, straight forward, predictable ways” (McDaniel). There’s nothing straight forward about parenting and so poetry attempting to portray the experience, should capture its complexity. Fortunately, there is a thrust in contemporary American poetry, to overturn simplified and sentimental portraits of parenthood. What enables these poets to preserve the authentic and complicated experience of parenthood? Poems that present complicated and diverse portraits of parenthood, subvert these traps through craft. These techniques, which include: form, tone, word choice, diction and narrative distance, enable a more nuanced and authentic portrayal. Critical readings of contemporary poems will identify these techniques in action, while excerpts from my creative manuscript, *What Turtle Blood Tastes Like*, will illustrate the benefits of my apprenticeship with the poetry of parenthood.

Because my work as a writer, the lens of my world view, changed drastically when I became a father, I sought out poetry that might explore this new paradigm. Writing poetry and parenting require common skill-sets: absolute attention, intuition, openness to wonder, and hunger for transformation. A poem is a lot like a child: wild, hungry, emotional, and full of potential for destruction. As I began to read widely and wildly, I encountered poetry that portrayed parents much differently than the idealized PTA moms, the stick-figure happy-family bumper stickers, or the little-league dads. What a relief to find the expectations had been lowered, and the taboos of the never weary, self-sacrificing, morally-wholesome parents, challenged.

I remember encountering Galway Kinnell's "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps" and recognizing in it the apprehension and unsettled emotions I was feeling over the new expectations of parenting. The speaker's composure, despite the timing of the child's arrival in the bedroom, struck me as odd. The poem celebrates the child, his essentialness, despite the way he changes the relationship between the couple. Absent here is any suggestion (one I had expected) that the child is to blame for creating this rift in intimacy. Kinnell's speaker reacts with veneration and humor, and without a hint of frustration.

For I can snore like a bullhorn
or play loud music
or sit up talking with any reasonably sober Irishman
and Fergus will only sink deeper
into his dreamless sleep, which goes by all in one flash,
but let there be that heavy breathing
or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house
and he will wrench himself awake
and make for it on the run—as now, we lie together,
after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodies,
familiar touch of the long-married,
and he appears—in his baseball pajamas it happens,
the neck opening so small he has to screw them on—
and flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep,

his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child. (lines 1-15)

The speaker's tone is nuanced, humorous, and ironic. The poem uses alternating levels of diction, the juxtaposition of informal ("snore," "bullhorn," "flash," "come-cry," "make for it") and formal diction ("making love," "touching along the length," "familiar touch of the long-married") creates tension between carefree and seriousness portraits of parents. This child will sleep through just about anything but "that heavy breathing" or "a stifled come-cry." Use of "come-cry" and "screw," feel out of context in a poem about a child seeking his parent's bed in the night while the phrase "the long-married," contextualizes the couple's muted reaction to the interruption. This isn't the first time Fergus has found his way into his parents' bedroom at an inopportune moment and the speakers' unexpectedly placid reaction has been refined over time. I return to this poem again and again, thinking of advice given to new parents to keep a loud house so that a child learns to sleep under real-world conditions. I came across Kinnell's speaker at a much earlier point in my parenting life, a time before I was able to handle similar interruptions with grace.

In the earliest of my parenting poems, "Lily Bud," I'd yet to encounter Kinnell's poem or others featuring any type of parent. Despite ten years of revision, it still feels unsure, very green, exaggerated, and self-indulgent. The tone is distinctly eager, full of awe and uncertainty, in stark contrast to Kinnell's mature, calm speaker. The speaker believes he can make metaphor into magic and is prepared to expedite the unexpected next step;

This path is a braided way,
through dawn-dark,
salmonberry-tangle and thorn,
from cedar house to mud beach.

In the shade grow chocolate
lilies, *fritillaria affinis*.
Lance-like leaf-whorls and speckled

tepals drip last night's rain.

I remember the midwife
tell me, "the cervix is like a flower."
Like this secret
wildflower I wonder?

I sit down
on path
beside this lily
beside this greening ground

and I sip tea.
Tea of steeped swollen
flowers, mouthful of mint
and cloud, a billow

of hot breath
and hope
onto a bowed
brown bud.

If her cervix is like
these lilies,
today our baby
will come.

"Lily Bud" also gives voice to the midwife, which could suggest the speaker feels out of his depth in the world of birth, so seeks the midwife's guidance. In this way the voice of the midwife is positioned as an authority to validate the metaphorical leap that follows. The poem trends sentimental due in part to the speaker's lightbulb moment ("*like this flower* I wonder?") in the third stanza and use of "hope" in the sixth stanza. "Hope" was subsequently removed through revision. However, the botanical diction ("fritillaria affinis," "leaf-whorls," "tepals"), personification of the lilies, and forced bloom metaphor work to counter the sentimentality of expectedness.

Scanning the contemporary American poetry landscape has revealed how sentimentality, which Oscar Wilde described as "having the luxury of an emotion without paying for it," can be

avoided. David Orr referred to this landscape as “the overdue poetry of parenthood” (2012). He observed a shift underway with contemporary American poets, men and woman, writing about the unglamorous struggle of parenthood with “refreshing frankness.” Of particular importance, he wrote, are the inclusion of less joyous aspects, “the rituals and worries” that come with the experience. Careful use of form, tone, word choice and related literary devices enable poets to inject depth and authenticity into these frank portraits of parents.

2. Beyond Theme: Taking Inventory of the Tools

In combination, the literary devices of form, tone, word choice, diction and narrative distance modify how the experience of a parent is conveyed. Tone can provide propulsion and build tension. It works to illuminate unexpected attitudes of speakers toward their experiences with parenthood, from sentimental to self-deprecating, sincere to sarcastic. Tone and form are deployed to unpack tropes and reveal undercurrents. What I had initially conceptualized as tone, the subtle vocal (sonic, audible, auditory) inflection that might signal sarcasm or excitement, turned out to be more complicated. After all, a poem on the page, if it is to have a sonic register, requires textual cues to signal a tone of voice. This type of signal can be detected in the way a parent answers the *real* questions beneath the questions of a child. How do parent speakers in poems dodge, deflect, or in rare cases, respond authentically to the ceaseless questions of a child? How does the speaker’s tone reveal sarcasm, authenticity or ideally the “heart-willingness of his answer” (Bly, Hillman and Meade, 1993)? To better grasp the capabilities of tone beyond the sonic I turned to The Poetry Foundation glossary of terms which defines tone as:

The poet’s attitude toward the poem’s speaker, reader, and subject matter, as interpreted by the reader. Often described as a “mood” that pervades the experience of reading the poem, it is created by the poem’s vocabulary,

metrical regularity or irregularity, syntax, use of figurative language, and rhyme (“Glossary of Poetic Terms”).

A closer look at the above definition revealed that tone encompasses many literary devices some rooted in form (meter, syntax, anaphora, rhyme) and others in meaning (figurative language; irony, sarcasm, personification, anthropomorphism). A similar definition goes a step further, “tone expresses the writer's or speaker's attitude toward the subject, the reader, or herself or himself” (Perrine, 695). This inclusion of the poet’s or speaker’s self-awareness is particularly relevant in the poetry of parenthood.

In this example from “Fairy Tale” by Amorak Huey, tone and form, expressed as word choice, line break (pacing, punctuation) and self-awareness amplify the complicated dependencies of parent-child relationships.

I cannot wear my father’s body—
we are a poor fit—

as my son will not
wear mine, now

or ever. To feel myself pinned
between the two boulders

of my body and my duty.
To always be the one leaving,

never the left behind—
such language

has the ring of truth
which resembles

a wedding ring
which resembles

the corona around the sun
on the day I’ve chosen

to drop my children
in the woods—

so many stories
end with a man

watching a trail
of bread crumbs

disappear and not
knowing how to feel.

There are so many
names for God;

if they rhyme with *father*
you're saying them wrong.

Throughout the poem, Huey's enjambed couplets are punctuated with long pauses (em dashes) which gives the impression that the speaker is struggling to come to terms in his role as a father. His emotions are complicated by the legacy of his relationship with his own father.

I cannot wear my father's body—
we are a poor fit—

as my son will not
wear mine, now

or ever...

The off-balanced form (the first twelve stanzas represent one long, enjambed sentence), with very few end-stopped lines, changes in the final two stanzas, calling attention to them. These stanzas, contain a full sentence, a complete, complicated thought, with two end stopped lines.

There are so many
names for God;

if they rhyme with *father*
you're saying them wrong.

Where there are additional end-stopped lines prior to the end of the poem, the momentary pause gives emphasis (“my duty”). The enjambed lines disambiguate the narrative, catch the speaker in a self-aware moment of doubt.

disappear and not
knowing how to feel.

All this punctuation pumps the brakes of the racing poem. Word choice contributes to the suffering tone, words like “wear” (dual-meaning, how do we *wear* our fathers, how do they *wear* on us?), “pinned,” “left behind,” “disappear,” and “wrong” bring emphasis to the speaker’s conflict as a father.

In this excerpt from “It Matters” the speaker’s self-awareness contributes to the tone. The speaker is hesitant and skeptical of his contributes as a father. The skepticism comes to a partial resolution, with “equilibrium,” but punctuation and word choice (“somehow,” “fallen,” “bruised,” “complete lack”) are in conflict with resolution.

I couldn't face it [the uphill climb of parenting]
day in, day out with-
out knowing how much
it matters, this measured chaos,

Monopoly games at 6 in the morning,
Pokémon Go walks in sideways rain,
the need to comfort a fallen and bruised
boy, yet again with the kind of healing

touch only I can bring, despite
my disconnection, my lack
of first-aid training, somehow I

can be all that these boys need, some-
how an equilibrium is reached. (lines 19-32)

These self-critical, sarcastic, and fallible parent speakers create a distinct and emotional tone realized through word choice, diction, lineation, repetition, metrical irregularity (form). I’ve

organized further discussion of the ways in which tone and form work to portray the varied experiences of parents, into three thematic categories: the awed, the conflicted, and the flawed.

3. The Awed

Poetry's heightened language and awareness are well equipped to capture the moments of awe surrounding the birth and raising of children. However, awe, in this context, risks contributing to one-sided portraits of parenting. Joy Katz calls this type of awe, "the Wonder of a New Life," and warns of its penchant to detract the true intent of a poem. The differences between poems that are trite and those that subvert this type of unearned emotion are subtle but significant. Form, tone, word choice and diction provide points of entry for revelation of a parent's apprehension. Strategically bringing attention to the humorous tone used to make light of emotionally charged experiences and to mask fear. Thomas Lux's "Upon Seeing an Ultrasound Photo of an Unborn Child" and Kevin Young's "Expecting" capture the expectant father's experience in very different ways. While both explore personal, bewildering moments, Young grounds the awed experience of hearing the heartbeat of an unborn baby in the body's potential for failure. Poems dealing with birth often get caught in exuberance of the moment which can lead to ones-sided depictions of new parents. The inclusion of intrusions from the world beyond the near-sighted wonder of the birth bring depth and complications to these portrayals.

Lux's poem, "Upon Seeing an Ultrasound Photo of an Unborn Child" approaches emotional superficiality. The title refers to "an" unborn child rather than "my" or "our" child, which distances the speaker from the child. There's situational irony in any poem about an unborn child that mentions "college" in the second line, yet this unusual line of thought helps define the speaker as quirky.

Tadpole, it's not time yet to nag you
 about college (though I have some thoughts
 on that), baseball (ditto), or abstract
 principles. Enjoy your delicious,
 soupy womb-warmth, do some rolls and saults
 (it'll be too crowded soon), delight in your early
 dreams — which no one will attempt to analyze.
 For now: may your toes blossom, your fingers
 lengthen, your sexual organs grow (too soon
 to tell which yet) sensitive, your teeth
 form their buds in their forming jawbone, your already
 booming heart expand (literally
 now, metaphorically later); O your spine,
 eyebrows, nape, knees, fibulae,
 lungs, lips... But your soul,
 dear child: I don't see it here, when
 does that come in, whence? Perhaps God,
 and your mother, and even I — we'll all contribute
 and you'll learn yourself to coax it
 from wherever: your soul, which holds your bones
 together and lets you live
 on earth. — Fingerling, sidecar, nubbin,
 I'm waiting, it's me, Dad,
 I'm out here. You already know
 where Mom is. I'll see you more directly
 upon arrival. You'll recognize
 me — I'll be the *tall-seeming*, delighted
 blond guy, and I'll have
 your nose. (in Todd & Purrington, 45)

Shifts in diction, from informal (“soupy,” “saults,” “tall-seeming,” “nag,” “ditto”) to formal (“whence,” “fibulae,” “nape,” “coax”) push and pull at the tone, highlighting the expectant father’s giddiness. The tone is at times playful, goofy and ruminant. Addressing the child as “Tadpole” and the emphasis given that word by the ensuing comma works to reveal a father who is not yet ready to think of the child as a human. The pause created by the em dash following “and even I—” suggests self-consciousness. The poem hinges on the word “whence” (line 17) which emphasize the speaker's considerations of origin, influence and responsibility. This feels authentic, the sort of meditation an expectant father would be expected to have.

But your soul,
dear child: I don't see it here, when
does that come in, whence? Perhaps God,
and your mother, and even I — we'll all contribute
and you'll learn yourself to coax it
from wherever: your soul, which holds your bones
together and lets you live
on earth. (lines 15-22)

The speaker then poses a complicated answer to his own question, considers whether it is God or parents that nurture and bond the family. Just as “whence” works to steer the tone of the poem inward to reveal some emotional depth, the choice of colloquial, even childlike diction used in the odd terms of endearment used to address the unborn child (“Fingerling,” “sidecar,” “nubbin”) veer the poem toward sentimental, saccharine territory. The effect builds and culminates in the final lines, particularly with the snarky placement of “tall-seeming” ahead of “delighted”. No anxiety or inner conflict is revealed. The health and birth of the child are not questioned. The poem perpetuates a one-sided portrait of a parent.

In his poem, “Expecting,” Kevin Young presents a similar scene to that of the Lux poem, however the anticipation is peppered with trepidation of possible miscarriage. The effect tempers and then heightens the anticipatory joy. Young’s speaker also addressed the unborn child directly, but with less diminutive diction, that suggests a fragility central to the poem (“fragile fern,” “snowflake,” “lost canary”). The use of direct address is complicated with the speaker referring to the woman alternately as “my wife,” “your mother” and “mama.” Bodily references are primarily to the mother’s body, which backgrounds the child’s unheard heart (“peach pit,” “unripe plum,” “nothing”).

Grave, my wife lies back, hands cross
her chest, while the doctor searches early
for your heartbeat, peach pit, unripe

plum—pulls out the world’s worst

boom box, a Mr. Microphone, to broadcast
your mother's lifting belly.

The whoosh and bellows of mama's body
and beneath it: nothing. Beneath
the slow stutter of her heart: nothing. (lines 1-9)

Enjambed lines and give emphasis to end words ("unripe," "worst," "nothing," "fragile," "fear," "power," "promise") and slow the pacing, building tension. The speaker tries not to lose hope, to be strong: "I hold my wife's feet to keep her here— // and me—trying not to dive starboard." Young's poem subverts the idea of the easy birth, the unexamined possibility of miscarriage – whereas Lux's poem does not, and in doing so represents the type of poem that takes the easy way. Accordingly, by withholding the confirmation of the heartbeat until the latter half of the poem, Young creates an uneasy tonality in which it seems possible the heartbeat will not be found, so that when it is finally heard, it is more significant.

..... And there
it is: faint, an echo, faster and further

away than mother's, all beat box
and fuzzy feedback. You are like hearing
hip-hop for the first time—power

hijacked from a lamppost—all promise. (lines 20-24)

Young's use of punctuation in the final lines, particularly the two em dashes, places added emphasis on "power" and "all promise." The father's trepidations with the external world are subtle when contrasted with the unconcealed excitement, relief and awe expressed in the final words, "all promise."

Mark Jarman's "After Disappointment," provides a counter argument to the notion that children only complicate the lives of their parents. The poem depicts a speaker who is able to escape the pressures of the adult world because he is a parent. This father's awe is subtle but not

insubstantial: he finds sanctuary in his daughter's room. Enjambment and long lines in the sonnet form are disorienting, confusing the place where one thought ends and another begins. The effect mirrors the father's emotional state. The absence of the daughter from the bulk of the poem is significant and strange, though it becomes clear it's not her absence that brings the speaker relief. The words used to describe the father's world ("grown body," "so tired," "plan") contrast with that of a daughter's ("enchanted"). The well-kept daughter's room creates dissonance with the messes often associated with a child's room and with the world beyond. The regulated meter and lines of the sonnet form are tidy like the daughter's room. The form also forces moderation and an economy of language, there's not a lot of room to achieve sentimentality through excess. Anxiety builds in lines 9 through 11, as the "cramped escapes and obstacles" the father must call the world intrude. The final two lines, with the daughter's entrance, return the poem to calm. In these lines, the speaker recognizes his fortune of having access to the child's world and a way to leave his behind.

To lie in your child's bed when she is gone
Is calming as anything I know. To fall
Asleep, her books arranged above your head,
Is to admit that you have never been
So tired, so enchanted by the spell
Of your grown body. To feel small instead
Of blocking out the light, to feel alone,
Not knowing what you should or shouldn't feel,
Is to find out, no matter what you've said
About the cramped escapes and obstacles
You plan and face and have to call the world,
That there remain these places, occupied
By children, yours if lucky, like the girl
Who finds you here and lies down by your side.

The use of second person also contribute to the distance of the poem. The father, admitting not knowing how to feel, wrestles with exhaustion and guilt over a few moments spent alone.

Through use of the second-person *you*, his thoughts are projected onto the reader. In this

intimate moment, the father longs “to feel small.” Jarman creates a glimpse into the complications of parenting, beginning with the familiar exhausted parent, but ending with a surprising turn, a parent finding comfort and refuge in his daughter’s room from “the cramped escapes and obstacles” of his world. The source of the father’s awe is fuzzy, further complicating his portrayal. Whether it’s awe for his daughter, or for the access he has to these safe places occupied by children, the poem closes with father and daughter together.

4. The Conflicted

Parenting, like writing poetry requires dealing with uncertainty. In more and more work featuring parent speakers, inner conflict is a common trait. As children complicate life, ethics and decision making, a new mood surrounds parents: one of caution, conflict and anxiety. In the poetry of the conflicted, parents in uncomfortable situations and spaces grapple with risk, fear and uncertainty. Contemporary poets use tone and form to engage this conflict on the page in order to comment on the messy mechanics of family which subverts inauthentic portrayals.

A common deadpan or understated delivery exists in poems that depict conflicted and flawed parents. Unlikely metaphors and unflattering word choices describe children to keep sentimentality at bay. In Matthew Nienow’s “Self-Portrait as Hammer,” a hammer is metaphor for both speaker and child. Figurative language abounds, as personification and anthropomorphism blur the lines between speaker and child, hammer and nail, building and breaking. The effect complicates expectations that a parent shapes a child by portraying how both parent and child influence and learn from each other.

It didn’t take long before the son realized the hammer was as good for wrecking as it was for keeping things together.

In the beginning, I imagined myself merely a rock, fit well to the palm, with a hunger for driving stakes and breaking weaker rock. Until I was the weaker rock.
(lines 20-24)

The speaker describes the actions of the child and between the father and child with physical language, “clamored,” “hammered,” “pounded” and “wrecking.” Referring to the child throughout the poem as “a son” and “the son” but never “my” or “our”, signals a subtle distance or discomfort the speaker wrestles with as a father. In this poem, the conflict seems rooted in how the speaker sees the world differently after the birth the child. The phrases “in the beginning,” “at first,” and “it didn’t take long” hint at this change of perspective. Tone and form work in tandem with the repeated phrase “in the beginning,” as the first line in five stanzas through the poem, marked by one distinct variation in the ninth stanza which inserts the word “new” and signals the first visual image of the child. “In the new beginning, I caught the son as he curled out of the womb, his purple face / puckered at the work of being made” (lines 18-19).

This type of repetition (anaphora) recalls the constant repeating of oneself experienced by parents. “In the beginning” is also a Biblical reference, a father recalling the Genesis creation story and questioning beginnings as if to ask, “which beginning” or “the beginning of what?” The repetition escalates the piece beyond the mundane accident of smashing a finger with a hammer. The Biblical phrase suggests a greater significance to the work of hammer and nail by connecting it to (even while criticizing) the creation myth, “In the beginning, I thought I knew what a hammer was; I thought a hammer was the / grief of entering a world never fully made” (lines 12-13).

Because of the shifting subject of the hammer metaphor throughout the poem, it’s tough to figure the target of this subtle criticism. Is it a criticism of a creator who’s failed to finish the work of world making? Or rather the speaker acknowledging his feeling of being somehow incomplete? In the following couplet the metaphor expands to introduce nail and wood,

suggesting the hammer's need for connection or attachment. Throughout the extended metaphor, Nienow complicates the father's narrative by concealing his emotional response.

In the beginning I couldn't have cared less about the nails, the way they bent or
sometimes stained the wood. I never imagined I might become so thin.
(lines 17-18)

In this stanza the nail metaphor seems to refer to both child and speaker. There was a time when the speaker couldn't have cared less about children, the way they impact the lives of others (the wood). Then the following line, provides a revealing glimpse into an honest, emotionally (or physically) raw indication of the father's struggle. The poem's sprawling long sentences are reduced to a short declarative, "I never imagined I might become so thin." The end-stopped line emphasizes "thin," conveying an emotional fatigue.

In "Good Bones," Maggie Smith creates a persona of a conflicted mother trying, or perhaps refusing, to explain the state of the world to her children. The speaker doesn't behave as expected. She does not provide honest, gentle reassurance to a scared child. The few optimistic observations of the world are quickly countered by harsh realities.

For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
Sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
Stranger, there is one who would break you, (lines 8-12)

The metaphor of a realtor "trying to sell them the world," suggests deception. The poem is an internal conversation that isn't directed at the children but is kept from them. However, the final hopeful lines, though questioning ("right?") are directed at her children, "This place could be beautiful, / right? You could make this place beautiful." The realtor metaphor is effective in conveying hope (heard in the final declarative, "right") that children can change the world.

Smith's speaker is caught up in her own worries and fears, uncertain how to "sell them the world" while keeping the worst of it veiled. Smith's use of the refrain, "though I keep this from my children" is clever, honest and cynical when paired with the laundry list of the atrocities of the world. It also speaks to the ceaseless repeating of oneself that comes with parenting. Yet hidden in the speaker's cynicism are subtle hints of hope. The mother elects to underestimate ("conservative estimate") just how bad the world is, as if to allow for the possibility of good. Whether this is for her own assurance, or the sake of her children is not clear.

The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.

The poem illustrates how a parent's awareness of the state of the world introduces fear and anxiety in conflict with the obligation to speak truth and to protect. It challenges the tenets of parenthood, questions whether parents can, or should, realistically and ethically shield children from the realities of the world.

Where Smith's poem is largely tempered by downplaying the worry of the speaker, D. Nurkse's "Only Child" uses both form and tone to inform the awed, yet conflicted, experience of the father speaker. Structured neatly in three numbered sections of eleven lines each, the poem's form creates tension because the order feels contrary to the stereotypical disorder of parenting. The form also serves as a container of a limited volume like Jarman's sonnet discussed earlier. This pressurizes the moments between father and daughter, while minimizing the risk of sentimentality through excess.

In terms of tone, the three sections work well to mark shifts in time and the development of child and father. For example, the first section begins, "I cradled my newborn daughter / and

felt the heartbeat / pull me out of shock.” The syntax veers beyond the expected sentimentality of the first heartbeat by inverting roles and complicating the birth scene. The emphasis on how the birth pulled the speaker out of shock, reverses the expected image of the daughter pulled out by the doctor’s hands. This inversion continues as the father asks questions of the newborn daughter which feel like questions a child would ask a parent, “I asked her / was there a place / where there was no world.”

Throughout sections two and three, imperative word choice describing the daughter (“orders,” “commands,” “she has power”) call into question who is in charge, flipping the expected dynamic. There is a reticent tone to the poem, the parent is conflicted, uncertain how to stay engaged when so exhausted. Even his attempt to disengage after the child falls asleep is thwarted.

At home she orders:
see me eat. I watch her
curl on herself, sleep;
as I try to leave the dark room
her dreaming voice commands me; watch.

The first section is the only time the possessive pronoun, “my daughter” is used to emotionally connect the speaker and the child. While sections two and three instead refer to “the child,” signaling the father’s attempt to disengage from his duty of parenting and distance himself from his daughter. Encountering “the child” in section two signals a change in the speaker, a sadness which, though a common sentiment in new parents, is not often captured in the poetry of parenthood.

In the park the child says:
watch me. It will not count
unless you see. (lines 12-14)

Whether the emotional register is sadness or disappointment, the effect builds tension between the father and child so that when reading these lines, I expected the speaker might catapult the child.

but tonight I remember
the principle of the lever,
I sit the child at one end,

I'm interested in the way Nurkse includes or suggests the child's speech. By keeping the diction simple and minimal, it rings as authentic and not overly sentimental, "It will not count / unless you see," "see me eat," "watch." The phrase, "and she shows me," hangs at the end of the line, feels like a turning point in the poem as the speaker becomes aware he is learning from his daughter.

In the park the child says:
watch me. It will not count
unless you see. And she shows me
the cartwheel, the skip, the tumble,
the tricks performed at leisure in midair, (lines 12-16)

The third section marks a transition for the speaker from the weariness and shock of section one and builds upon the growth of the father in section two. Form is vital to the piece as the speaker basks in a state of stunned wonder, having found his place at the center (the fulcrum) of his daughter's world.

Always we passed the seesaw
on the way to the swings
but tonight I remember
the principle of the lever,
I sit the child at one end, [26]
I sit near the center,
the fulcrum, at once she has power
to lift me off the earth
and keep me suspended
by her tiny weight, she laughing,
I stunned at the power of the formula. (lines 22-32)

In this epiphanic moment (lines 26-30), physics and the workings of the world are simplified through the act of a father and daughter playing on the playground. Breaking lines after the phrases “she has power” and “keep me suspended” suggest greater symbolic meaning than their positions on a seesaw.

If not for the weariness in the tone, paired with the shift from “daughter” to “child” in section two, section three might push into sentimental terrain. Yet the unexpected metaphors and mathematical diction (“principle of the lever,” “fulcrum,” “formula”) provide a fresh context for the relationship of father and daughter. Without the metaphor of the lever established through the seesaw and the playground, the line “to lift me off the earth” would be too precious.

A portrayal of a parent acknowledging their own limitations or failures is an authentic and complicated one. In “Song of Tomorrow,” (31) Matthew Nienow succeeds in capturing the conflicted emotions of a parent and embraces the inevitability of failure. The speaker of the poem wrestles with the uncertain futures of his two sons and the knowledge that despite all efforts, their paths are beyond his influence.

Now I begin with the hands of my two sons,
clutching the small predictions for their lives with what

every father knows, each digit soft and already
damaged— I cannot save them — these two bright

chances at my side, burning in the blonde sun (lines 1 through 5)

Here the use of a line break severs the connection between the fingers (“digit”) of the child and the word “damaged”. The effect creates ambiguity and places additional weight on “damaged” which contributes to the conflicted tone of the piece.

Nienow likens this desire to protect and to hold on to the magic of children being children as trying to hold water. “Save” in the phrase “I cannot save them,” could be read as “preserve.”

I am a man trying
to hold water in cupped hands— I will fail

to hold it; I will fail; but I will know
what joy there is in feeling it pass. (lines 13-16)

In this example, the line break emphasizes “fail,” amplifying it beyond the holding of water. Acknowledging the inevitability of failure (“I cannot save them”) to live up to internal and external expectations placed on parents, allows a letting go (“feeling it pass”), a relief of burden. This joy found in letting go is at the core of the poem. Couplets suggest an orderliness, a calmness, that is unexpected from such a conflicted speaker. In that way, the form is working against the defeatist tone. Were failure more central to the poem than the joy found in surrendering to futility, the form might be less orderly and broken-down.

5. The Flawed

I’ve found my tribe in the vulnerable and self-critical voices who air their flaws despite the expectations the world has for good parents. Poems by Rachel Zucker and Matthew Nienow contain flawed speakers but do not succumb to simplification, sentimentality or pity. In these poems, fractured ethics, internal conflicts and lack of confidence in child rearing portray complicated parents.

Depictions of flawed and abusive parents are frequent in literature. What these portrayals often lack is first-person insight into the struggles of those parents. These insightful perspectives create the opportunity for finding empathy for these flawed, damaged and unhealthy characters. Rachel Zucker’s work resonates with this type of vulnerable honesty. Zucker’s *Museum of Accidents* clearly illustrates the way form and tone can complicate the expression of parenting.

Her experiments effectively represent the emotional and psychological state of the poem's speakers. Zucker's word choices ("taken," "smothered," "bothered") are unexpected, authenticating the traumatized speaker, "Motherhood has taken my I and smothered her to smithereens. I'm bothered" (*Museum*, 47). The following example from "The Day I lost My Deja Vu" is not just notable for its word choice, but for its fragmented lines and isolation of the line "today my beautiful child eviscerates me."

even the day my firstborn son broke me
opened and split shocked shattered that quaint notion of "before"

is no more than a rung of how I got
a mother's now-mind, a strung-together-bead's walk.

this moment. this. this. this.
is not what I
expected...

today my beautiful child eviscerates me.

a charmer, a snake, he fits my living heart
into his fist blunt fangs and I go willingly
into love with him. he is
every day a new child
and every day I'm still in love means
nothing like before. (lines 24-37)

Zucker deploys unflattering word choice to describe the child ("eviscerates," "snake," "fist blunt fangs") to reveal a parent struggling to find affection for her child. More recent work like "Hours Days Years Unmoor their Orbits," through its use of traditional lineation and fewer fragments is less experimental, feels less immediate, more reflective. However, the tone is similar. The accusatory sentence structure and word choice ("I don't expect," "made me") suggests a parent who is bitter about the sacrifices parenting requires.

I don't expect you to remember or
understand the many ways I've kept you

alive or the life my love for you
has made me live” (lines 9-12)

Parents work within a culture of expectation to serve as strong, positive role-models for children. However, parents are human and inherently flawed. Poetry featuring unexpected parent speakers allows an opportunity for diverse portraits of imperfect parents.

This type of work, featuring conflicted and flawed parents has given me courage to write vulnerably. In the poem, “On a Kite String” I acknowledge a personal struggle and confounding the notion of the ideal domestic life.

This poem and this dying
dog and my they-look-just-like-you
boys. Their waking and their vitamins.

Their Rice Krispies and raisin bagels, their Magic
Treehouse and Olympians and their bedtimes.
Dying dog and his— our— my— pills.

....

...One for me so I could see
through world blur and empty, wet eyes,
sent up on a kite-string all day.

How I blurred and softened hard edges
believed the smell of morning
sea fog, the sound of my son’s cello,
cup of coffee and a kiss from my wife

were not enough. Beach barbecues and knee
high rye grass hiss. Kids leaping
creeks, topping boots and building fires.
I cracked and vanished so many sweaty beers,
roasted hot
dogs and salmon on coals. Sunset on snow
caps. Why wasn’t this enough?

Big white peaks edge into sky, little white caps roughen the water,
little white pills in my pocket, in me, in the ashes
of dog taken away on the wind.
(lines 1-6, 23-34)

As in Zucker and Nienow, dissonance is created through diction. A dying dog and an addict speaker conflict with the domestic expectations of the poem. Lines in which the speaker wrestles with his addiction spread across the page with irregular spacing, signaling disorder. Nienow's "You Want Me to Say it Pretty" occupies similarly dissonant terrain. This unexpected glimpse into the workings of a parent includes; "slurred," "crippled," "poison." Line break, lack of capitalization and punctuation create an intoxicated effect. I had to swim through the unpunctuated, broken language to extract meaning, to recognize the raw authenticity of this speaker's despair.

but under the poison I was committed to
I can only remember the first five minutes
were so beautiful that it seems impossible

how nearly I lost my own children
to the woman who was willing to leave me (lines 1-5)

As the poem progresses, the tone shifts from casting external blame ("she couldn't hear the song," "if they [the children] could just hold their breath a little longer") to admitting responsibility ("I was that weak"). However, the metaphors used to represent drunken behavior ("song," "music"), addiction and a failing relationship ("the house was filling with water"), create a tone that is emotionally detached from the severity of the situation.

she couldn't hear the song
I made a music I sang to the feeling I sang
to who it was I thought I was and I heard it

it was an under-the-water-kind-of-song
and the house was filling with water

and the children were fish or so it seemed
but in the morning I could see I was only
asking that they hold their breath that

if they could just hold their breath a little longer
they might become fish and how lovely

to live in a house swimming with light every
prayer slurred so what it was beautiful to me
to cripple the intellect I would say to myself I

was committed to it I hardly noticed how close
I was between not wanting to live and not

knowing how to leave I was that weak
the poison that strong I wanted it to end
but I did not dare bow out

A poem depicting a parent, who in the midst of such personal crisis, returns to his commitment to his children and to his family attests to the burden of duty parents carry. The absence of punctuation in the final line feels intentional, emblematic of the speaker's desire to persist.

6. Conclusion

The poetry of parenthood has evolved to include the increasingly complicated experiences of parents. Through the inclusion of “refreshing frankness” and the “rituals and worries” (Orr) typically overshadowed by simplified and sentimental portraits of parenting, the poems discussed here have challenged and countered assumptions. A complex braiding of the lives of parents with their offspring deserves a poetic tradition that includes a diverse range of experience, human development and emotion. The dark and the light. Through the multifaceted aspects of tone and form, the poetry of parenthood sidesteps sentimentality and attempts to capture the authentic joy, pain and grit that comes through the courageous act of raising a child. Parents, whether our parents or the parents many of us will become, encounter a wide range of trials and triumphs and so accordingly, the poetry of these experiences run the gamut; awed, flawed and conflicted.

Works Cited

- Bly, Robert, James Hillman, and Michael Meade. *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men*. HarperCollins, 1993.
- Glossary of Poetic Terms: Poetry Foundation*, “Tone,” “Figurative Language,” “Irony” and “Anaphora” www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms. Accessed 30 August 2017.
- Huey, Amarak. “Fairy Tale.” *Rust and Moth*. Autumn 2017.
- Jarman, Mark. “After Disappointment.” *Bone Fires: New and Selected Poems*. Sarabande Books, 2011.
- Katz, Joy. “Baby Poetics.” *American Poetry Review*, vol. 42, no. 6, 2013. Accessed 5 March 2018 from <http://aprweb.org/poems/baby-poetics>.
- Lux, Thomas. “Upon Seeing an Ultrasound Photo of an Unborn Child” in *Morning Song: Poems for New Parents* by Susan Todd & Carol Purington [eds]. St. Martin's Press, 2011.
- McDaniel, Jeffrey. “Babies, Parents, and Poetry.” *Poetry Foundation: Harriet Blog*. Accessed 10 March 2018 from www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/05/babies-parents-and-poetry.
- Nienow, Matthew. *House of Water*. Alice James Books, 2016.
- Nurkse, D. “Only Child” from *The Rules of Paradise*. Four Way Books, 2001.
- Orr, David. “It’s a Genre! the Overdue Poetry of Parenthood.” *National Public Radio*. July 23, 2012. www.npr.org/2012/07/23/157071197/its-a-genre-the-overdue-poetry-of-parenthood.
- Perrine, Laurence. *Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense* (3rd ed.). Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Smith, Maggie. *Good Bones*. Tupelo Press, 2017.
- Wiegers, Michael (ed). *The Poet’s Child*. Copper Canyon Press, 2002.
- Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis, being the First Complete and Accurate Version of ‘Epistola: In Carcere Et Vinculis’ the Last Prose Work in English of Oscar Wilde*; Philosophical Library, 1950.
- Young, Kevin. *The Book of Hours*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.
- Zucker, Rachel. *Museum of Accidents*. Wave Books, 2009.

Zucker, Rachel. "Hours Days Years Unmoor Their Orbits." Originally published in Poem-a-Day on June 23, 2017, by the Academy of American Poets. Accessed July 1, 2017 from www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/hours-days-years-unmoor-their-orbits

Annotated Bibliography

Akhmatova, Anna Andreevna, and D. M. Thomas. *Selected Poems*. Penguin Books, 1988.

Akhmatova's *Selected Poems* recounts a war-torn, Stalin-era Russia, the persecution of her fellow citizens, the Siege of Leningrad and the poet's struggle with the loss of her son to forced labor camps. I found the abundance of natural description, from the Black Sea coast to the willows, crows, and thistles quite surprising given the stark context of World War II. Each poem is dated (1912-1945) and some contain the location they were written which I found useful in placing the events and exotic locations in relation to the wars. Translator D.M. Thomas includes further notes on the texts providing insight to less accessible works. An important theme in my own work is reconstructing my grandparents' experience fleeing their homeland in 1944, aided by Germans, on the brink of the second Russian occupation of Lithuania. Akhmatova's work provides a glimpse of the terror my own family escaped during this historical period.

Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne. *But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise: Poems*. Red Hen Press, 2012.

Bertram's lyric experiments create sparkling images and sounds, but often at the expense of narrative. In these dreams, equations, landscapes and fractals, the world rushes past at high speed allowing glimpses through the windshield, the side windows and some distorted view through the rearview. These poems will energize and challenge all but the most dedicated reader. Claudia Rankine describes Bertram's collection as "poetry that pushes reading into the realm of experience."

Bly, Robert, James Hillman, and Michael Meade. *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men*. HarperCollins, 1993.

My reading focused on the section “Father’s Prayers for Sons and Daughters” and Michael Meade’s introduction. Meade’s on to an area I’d like to focus on that for lack of a better term I’ll refer to as the call and response of a child’s questions and a parent’s answers which depending on the weight of the question can be heavily influenced by the tone of the poem’s speaker. Meade focuses on the father’s reply in Stafford’s poem “With Kit, Age 7, At the Beach.” Meade refers to the father’s capacity to hear the real question (behind the child’s question and in the “heart-willingness of his answer.”

"How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?"
"As far as was needed, " I said,
and as I talked, I swam.

In the exchange between father and daughter, the act of swimming stands in for the distances a father will go for his child. The final line seems to say that the act of answering Kit’s question, (as I talked) with honesty, demonstrates his commitment. The anthology also included parenting poems by Li-Young Lee, Galway Kinnell and Gary Snyder that I considered for inclusion in my critical essay.

Bradfield, Elizabeth. *Approaching Ice: Poems*. Persea Books, 2010

In *Approaching Ice*, Bradfield artfully fuses the history of arctic exploration with a profoundly personal exploration of relationships and the heart. Poems that begin with found text extracted and annotated from Bowditch’s *American Practical Navigator*, and from the journals and biographies of polar explorers, shift unexpectedly into self-reflection and contemporary commentary. At the heart of the collection are the seven entries “Notes on Ice in *Bowditch*,”

braided throughout. These poems begin with a spectacular inventory of the types and conditions of ice a polar navigator may encounter. The found text definitions are followed by poetic interpretations, sea and ice become metaphor for relationships and the “climate of the heart.” With Bradfield’s imaginative touch and sense of emotion, the uncertain stories of the men who raced to the poles, their peril and their ambition, become certain and complete. This book is an important read for those interested in forms using historical documents or events as points of departure for imaginative exploration, alternate histories or as metaphor for personal reflection.

Corral, Eduardo C. *Slow Lightning: Poems*. Yale Series of Younger Poets Vol. 106. Yale University Press, 2012.

Slow Lightning explores the relationship between master and servant, asking through a cast of lovers, a father, border agents, smugglers, visual artists and animals: “Who serves who?” His observations on the charged politics of immigration between Mexico and the United States are poignant and capture the kinetic energy present in a border crossing. The poems collected here are erotic, ekphrastic and experimental. They slither between difficult subjects like borders, sexual orientation, our animal origins and other invisible lines. These poems probe as they ask; “What am I?” and “Where do I come from?” A significant contribution to a body of work rooted in the shifting nature of borderlands and other between places.

Christensen, Inger, and Susanna Nied. *Butterfly Valley: A Requiem*. New Directions, 2004.

Butterfly Valley includes the book’s namesake, a sonnet cycle and requiem for butterflies, childhood and the Danish countryside. Three additional long works are included; “Watersteps,” “Poem on Death,” and “Meeting.” Each of these longer works are experimental, utilize innovative forms and all but “Butterfly Valley” exponentially build, gaining furious momentum

only to veer sharply as form and structure suddenly collapse. “Watersteps” and “Meeting” are the most challenging experiments, while the sonnets of “Butterfly Valley” reliably contain the elemental color palette “cinnabar, ochre, phosphor yellow, gold”, a wondrous balance of the natural and the post-atomic. Christensen is a master of specific language. Poets working on medium/long forms as well as those trying to move away from generic/expected diction will benefit from time spent in Christensen’s experimental terrain.

Collins, Billy. *Aimless Love : New and Selected Poems*. Random House, 2013.

What makes a Billy Collins poem so accessible? Is it the self-deprecating humor, the sarcasm, the length of his poems, the dependable and non-varying stanza lengths? Is it the sly titles he uses to set his reader up for success, for those aha moments or the quick accumulation, the brief build-up to some minor moment framed so that it feels magnificent? This question of accessibility brings me back again to Collins in his most recent new and selected collection. There’s plenty of variety in these new poems though some themes emerge; several of the *ars poetica* variety (“Drinking Alone”, “The Suggestion Box”, “If this Were a Job I’d be Fired”), a couple that playfully address poetic forms (“Looking for a Friend in a Crowd of Arriving Passengers: A Sonnet”, “Villanelle” and “A Word About Transitions”), many of Collins’ planes poems (poems written from a high place with a uniquely omniscient perspective) and a few ekphrastic pieces (“Note to Antonin Dvorak”, “Carrara”).

Dove, Rita. *Thomas and Beulah: Poems*. Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1986.

Thomas and Beulah is a book-length poetic sequence exploring with poetic license the lives of Dove’s maternal grandparents. Containing two parts, the first focusing on Thomas, the second on Beulah, Dove’s verse covers immense emotional terrain in 23 short poems. The

linked poems allow recurring themes to cycle back, dredging up images, memories and specific place. Color is employed strategically, at times hinting at the complexity of race, mixed-heritage and the inner (identity, emotion) and external (societal) conflicts that come with skin color. By sequencing these historic poems non-linearly, the coded narrative reveals itself as it moves back and forth through time and generations. Dove's portrait of mid-twentieth-century Akron contains glimpses of the great migration and the resulting impacts of diversification in an otherwise homogeneous community. Writers working with biographical material should take notice of Dove's technique of creating a history compiled of sparse lyric moments as an effective example of moving beyond exposition.

---. *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Penguin Books, 2011

In a voice that is honest, informative and innovative, Rita Dove tackles a century of American poetry, beginning with an introduction exploring major periods, styles and influences. Dove makes an illuminating connection between the Civil War and the beginnings of twentieth-century American poetry. She also cites the "double-yolked egg" of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman as the starting point for the breadth and diversity of American poetry. In her introduction to *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, editor Dove asks, "Is that a voice that will be remembered? Did he or she make an impact that mattered?" This anthology will serve well any poet seeking a broad survey of the century and Dove's introduction is a work of art on its own.

Fairchild, B. H. *The Art of the Lathe: Poems*. Alice James Books, 1998.

When I read B.H. Fairchild, I suspect he once gathered along with a crowd of United Auto Workers members or other laborers and their families to listen to a Philip Levine reading of

“They Feed They Lion.” Both men find the sacred in the industrial and desolate landscapes and in the lives of the working class. These are worlds not typically raised into the light of poetry. Here machinists and welders are found at work, sweating in steel roofed shops, but also engaged in play, on sandlots, VFW basketball courts tormented by pride, where “boys rise up in old men, wings begin to sprout / at their backs.” Fairchild uncovers there’s music and art to be found in the grind of work, aging and remembering our fathers and their unbelievable stories.

Flynn, Nick. *Some Ether: Poems*. Graywolf Press, 2000.

Nick Flynn’s *Some Ether* compulsively explores the tenuous terrain of memory. To a degree this book calls to mind Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” in the various takes on the mother’s suicide and the lingering, less-than-pleasant visions of life under her care before her death. The dreamy pacing somehow provides for a slow unfolding of the miraculous; floods raise the dead, a man draws a door on rock, opens it and steps through. *Some Ether* pushes through the traumatic event and celebrates the power of the imagination to enable belief in the impossibility of healing. Flynn’s diversity of forms, understated manipulation of syntax and sound all while maintaining accessibility are deserving of closer study to any student of contemporary Twentieth-Century American poetry.

García Lorca, Federico; García Lorca, Francisco; and Allen, Donald. *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca*. New Directions Books, 2005.

---. “Theory and Function of the *Duende*” in Allen, Donald, and Tallman, Warren. *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. n.p.: Grove Press : distributed by Random House, 1973.

Lorca explores the concept of *duende* as a sort of demonic inspiration in the essay, “Theory and Function of the Duende.” He presents the demonic influence of *duende* as a contrasting element to the angelic or muse influenced work associated with inspiration (passive bright art). In his introduction to *The Selected Poems*, Merwin also comments on this dark “wild

current” present in Lorca’s work and said to have fueled the best of Andalusian gypsy culture. Francisco Garcia Lorca’s preface contextualizes the different periods in his brother’s work and comments on the inherent challenges of presenting a collection which includes the unpolished, early work in which the poet is still refining his themes, forms and voice, at the potential risk of not allowing for the inclusion of some more mature work. Poets interested in the ghazal form should look carefully at those included here from *Divan del Tarmarrit*.

Harrison, Jim. *In Search of Small Gods*. Copper Canyon Press, 2009.

Jim Harrison’s *In Search of Small Gods* builds a quiet space in which time is fluid and small gods (birds, insects, animals) speak of sacred things. All but the multi-part “Golden Window” are short poems (20 lines or less), dense in meaning and wonder. In Harrison’s polytheistic world, the senses and a little humility are all that is needed to hear the gods speaking. This collection will prove invaluable to those needing a reminder of the simple magic spiraling our daily lives.

Hayes, Terrence. *Lighthead*. Penguin Books. 2010

Hayes’ poems are full of depictions of racial tension and trauma born on an inheritance of anger and inequality. Characters refuse predictability, writhe and shed stereotypes and inhabit pivotal moments in childhood, poetic landscapes scaffolded by innovative forms (pecha kucha, liner notes, imaginary t-shirts). *Lighthead* feels akin to Rankine’s *Citizen* in that both fiercely criticize the notion of a “post-racial America” and present difficult to stomach, yet viscerally real images of everyday racial inequality. The language of *Lighthead* is dazzling, informed by Hayes’s ecstatic lyricism and finely tuned ear for the heard and misheard.

Hennen, Tom. *Darkness Sticks to Everything: Collected and New Poems*. Copper Canyon Press, 2013.

Tom Hennen's *Darkness Sticks to Everything: Collected and New Poems* includes selections from six prior books plus thirty-one new poems. A brief introduction by Jim Harrison and an extended afterward by Thomas R. Smith provide welcome context to the life, work and influences of this little known contemporary Midwestern American poet. In his afterward, Smith praises, "Hennen's music, which, though plain, is far from simple" and compares his economy of language to Kooser, Bly, Han-Shan and others. In his hands, worlds rise and fall in eight lines or fewer. What is common and abundant in rural America, crickets, thunderstorms, and hay piles become tinderboxes for the miraculous.

Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Notes on the Assemblage*. City Lights Books, 2015

Juan Felipe Herrera is both poet and advocate targeting his critical eye and strong voice on institutions of discrimination and the struggle of immigrant and indigenous populations and people of color. *Notes on the Assemblage* rubs up against the politics of contemporary America. Despite the array of forms from traditional to highly experimental, these poems are highly accessible and portray the lives of the marginalized with care and pride.

Hicok, Bob. *Animal Soul*. Invisible Cities Press, 2001.

Bob Hicok's poems veer, jag and go sideways resembling a debris strewn trail of thought or the way memory returns. Dealing in a fragmented currency, the poems feel wild and surprising as if even Hicok doesn't know where his explorations will lead. There's the sense that the activity of creating the poems, living briefly in the fluid space in which they exist, is a sacred act. Utilizing enjambment and long sentences broken with punctuation, Hicok finds

comfort in double meaning, second guessing and the poems may test a reader's stamina and willingness to suspend and suspend and suspend closure.

Hikmet, Nâzım. *Poems of Nazim Hikmet*. Trans. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk Blasing. Persea Books, 2002.

Hikmet's poetry transcends the expected concrete and iron landscapes of a life spent in prison and exile. It's clear Hikmet viewed continued participation in the world beyond the iron doors as essential to his art and even more importantly, his survival. Employing artful metaphor, fierce optimism and love for his battered Turkish homeland and its suffering people, Hikmet's verse is alive with hope, declaring, "We know how to mix hope with our medicine," and "...however and wherever we are / we must live as if we will never die." From Hikmet I can learn how to include the tragic events of history without allowing the tragic to become the focus of the poem. This technique can benefit writers trying to process historical family trauma in a way that can be healing or celebratory of survival and not be completely consumed by the darkness.

Jacobsen, Rolf. *The Roads have Come to an End Now : Selected and Last Poems of Rolf Jacobsen* translated by Robert Bly, Roger Greenwald and Robert Hedin.. Copper Canyon Press, 2001.

Robert Bly, Roger Greenwald and Robert Hedin translate sixty years of Jacobsen's work documenting Norway's modernization. Early poems are rooted in a rural, natural world give way in later career to poems situated in the modern, post-nuclear world. Yet Jacobsen deftly weaves elements of this modern world (roof-top antennas, subway platforms), into the fabric of the natural world. I will hold onto the later work (1975-85) recalling his wedding day ("Barb-wire Winter" 155) with crisp, unsentimental joy, the day he first met his wife ("The Fireflies" 163) and the awkward emptiness of the world in the wake of her death ("Room 301" 153).

Jarman, Mark. *Questions for Ecclesiastes : Poems*. Story Line Press, 1998.

Jarmon's *Questions for Ecclesiastes* begins with an investigation of the sources of our personal, pivotal narratives in "Ground Swell." The title poem explores the inadequacy of a clergyman's attempts to comfort a suicide victim's parents. Shifting from nostalgia for childhood, to the more complex realms of war, suicide, faith and raising children the collection culminates in a deep questioning of religion, Biblical narratives and personal faith in "Unholy Sonnets" and "Last Suppers." Any poet or writer questioning what is their most important and necessary subject should spend some hours in the poem "Ground Swell."

Kooser, Ted. *The Blizzard Voices*. University of Nebraska Press, 2006

In this short, narrative collection each poem is identified not by title but as "A Man's Voice" or "A Woman's Voice." The lack of titles and page numbers seems to suggest reading cover to cover, allowing the variations on school teacher and student perspectives, luck, loss and a sense of awe at the sheer power of weather create stories that drift like snow, covering and revealing. Kooser uses the Blizzard of 1888 as starting point to explore a variety of perspectives through verse, a child's, a teacher's, a parent's, in the fury and aftermath of the freak storm. A valuable read for those interested in forms such as novel/memoir in verse, or imaginative explorations which begin with historical documents or events.

Limon, Ada. *Bright Dead Things*. Milkweed Editions, 2015

In *Bright Dead Things*, Limon prepares for, and loses her mother while simultaneously exploring the disorientation that ensues. The sequence dealing with this theme caught me off-guard and send me spinning upon learning of my own mother's failing health. In particular, "The Riveter," (36) in which an action plan for death is prepared, "When that happens, we do

that. / But what I forgot / was that this was out plan, / not hers, not the one doing the dying, / this was the plan for those / who still had a *next*. / See, our job was simple: / keep on living. Her job was harder, / the hardest.” While grappling with death & loss (“The Long Ride,”) Limon also examines origins (“Play it Again,” “Oh Please, Let it be Lighting,”) disorientation, faith (“Miracle Fish,”) sexuality (“Oranges & the Ocean,” “Glow”), femininity (“How to Triumph like a Girl,”) relationships (“Service,” “The Good Fight,”) and identity (“Prickly Pear & Fisticuffs”). I expect to return to this book in the coming years as I process the declining health of my mother.

Martens, Amelia. *The Spoons in the Grass are there to Dig a Moat: Poems*. Sarabande Books, 2016.

Martens’ speakers and forms are playful and refreshing, her prose poems quietly buzzing with humor, subtle irony and irreverence. One reviewer said, “Martens’ debut collection contends with the surreality of parenting in the Age of Terror” (Barrelhouse 2016). Through a series of poems featuring Jesus engaged in unexpected, contemporary vocations (drive-thru worker, baggage handler, maquiladora owner) and venues (bar, stadium,), she provokes topics that fester society, religion, immigration, identity theft and protection. I was hooked early by the poem, “We Will Be Long Gone” which takes the form of answers to a child’s persistent bedtime questions (Why? Why? Why?) though the questions don’t appear in the poem but are implied.

Martinaitis, Marcelijus. *K.B. : the suspect*. Trans. Laima Vince. White Pine Press, 2009.

K.B. The Suspect explores the historical context of post-Soviet era Lithuania through a series of persona poems. K.B. is a paranoid, disconnected poet struggling with self-expression after decades of repression, puzzling over commercial advertising (is this propaganda?) and displaying a great numbness to human emotion. In one poem K.B. pushes past a crowd of

onlookers where a tree has fallen and killed a man only to wonder, “what kind of tree is that?” Love, disconnected eroticism, despair, hope and suicide are understated everyday occurrences. Amidst the turmoil of personal and national identity emerges Martinaitis’ experimental character *K.B. The Suspect*. Martinaitis complicates point of view by including a slippery character known only as “the Author” and shifts between first, second and third person. Those looking to experiment with point of view will enjoy puzzling over this collection.

Mitchell, Margaretta, and Zack Rogow. *The Face of Poetry*. University of California Press, 2005.

This anthology covers a broad, wonderfully diverse and manageable terrain of 20th and 21st century American poetry curated from those participating in the UC Berkeley Lunch Poems reading series between 1997 and 2004. In their capacity as directors of the series, Rogow and Hass lend their distinct tastes to curate a lineup spanning the various schools and styles of English poetics. Most welcomed are the inclusion of many lesser-known poets alongside giants. The pairing of Rogow’s brief biographical sketches that include quick summative remarks on the craft elements and content of each of the poems with Mitchell’s candid portraits make this anthology engaging and accessible for even general readers. Rogow’s ability to concisely illustrate the mechanics at work are helpful to those learning to identify and dissect the how of a poem and write more effective critical responses. The included CD is icing, particularly highlighting those poets whose work is intended for performance such as Sekou Sundiata, Cornelius Eady, Luis Rodriguez and Quincy Troupe, among others.

Merwin, W. S. *Migration: New & Selected Poems*. Copper Canyon Press, 2007.

As a reader new to Merwin's work, *Migration: New & Selected Poems* served as an introduction to his style of disjointed syntax, repetition, rant-like-pacing (of longer poems), erratic capitalization and lack of punctuation. Included in the collection are two extraordinary books, *The Lice* (1967) and *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970). While I found Merwin's syntax and repetition mesmerizing and effective in engaging my focused attention for the task of decoding, I wouldn't call these two books very accessible. Animals are a focal point in these works and the poems often feature non-human speakers, spirits or totems. These unexpected perspectives are refreshing, mythical and left me hungry for closer study of the ecopoetics of Merwin's work. Writers exploring the use of non-human speakers or alternate point of view will find in Merwin strategies for suspending disbelief of these unusual perspectives, ways to postpone identification of the speaker and avoid falling into extended conceits.

Neruda, Pablo and César Vallejo. *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*. Translated by Robert Bly. Beacon Press, 1971.

Robert Bly, serving in the capacity of editor and co-translator with James Wright has collected a diverse retrospective of work by a renowned international poet. *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems* includes selections from five of Pablo Neruda's books, representing the arc of Neruda's poetry with an emphasis on the transformation resulting from his political awakening (1934-49) and persecution. My study of this book did not include the work of Cesar Vallejo. In the introduction Bly discusses the negative reception Neruda experienced during this period when his poetry shifted from its romantic, surreal roots, to focus on historical and political atrocities. I found Neruda's work of this period provides a fascinating glimpse into his attitudes toward colonialism as well as the international political relations of the era. The poems that

affected me most viscerally were those of *Residencia en la Tierra* (I and II) written while Neruda served in the Chilean consular service in the Far East. In this work he captures the loneliness and isolation he experienced living abroad, in terra incognita.

Nienow, Matthew. *House of Water*. Alice James Books, 2016.

Nienow's *House of Water* recalls B.H. Fairchild's *The Art of the Lathe* in its elevating of the physical, tooled work of machinist and boat builder through poetry. Nienow extends his meditations on the trial-and-error-learning of boat building to that of raising his two sons. In "Self Portrait with Hammer," (6) the hammer serves as a tool for understanding the world, for making and wrecking. The speaker himself identifies as a hammer, "In the usual ways, I knocked against my life and, not surprisingly my life knocked back," yet is able to extend the metaphor to describe the impact (*stained, thin, weaker*) the son has on his life. To describe a hammer as grief is unexpected but works, and then leaves me considering whether it's the world that's not fully made or the newborn child?

We had a son who seemed very much the hammer. His bone teeth clamored
at the breast. He was new to me, but the pounding was older than any of us.

In the beginning, I thought I knew what a hammer was; I thought a hammer was
the
grief of entering a world never fully made.

At first, the son wanted to know how it worked, how the wood made room for the
nail.

In the beginning, I couldn't have cared less about the nails; the way they bent or
sometimes stained the wood. I never suspected that I might become so
thin.

The poem which begins with the hard, bruised hands engaged in the hard work of boat building shifts to describe the birth of a child using similar diction.

In “Song of Tomorrow,” the speaker faces the realization that despite his fierce commitment to provide for his sons, he admits, “I cannot save them” (31). However the final two couplets of the poem confirm that the speaker still finds joy in raising his boys despite the inevitability he will somehow fail them. The enjambed line ending in *fail* creates tension and momentarily severs the metaphor of holding water. In this moment the speaker is a father, aware of his limitations, perhaps unconfident in his abilities.

Nurkse, D. *The Rules of Paradise*. Four Way Books, 2001.

I happened upon two poems, “Only Child” and “First Grade Homework” in *Poetry Magazine* that captured a father and his young daughter engaged in tender and revealing moments yet the poems avoided sentimentality so sought out the collection. Nurkse explores his Estonian family’s escape from Nazi Europe during World War II. These two subjects, raising children and negotiating the ways our family histories complicate our understanding of the world, are areas important to my own work and so *The Rules of Paradise* has served as a master text. My own poem, “Ragged, Loved” began as an apprentice poem based on “Only Child.” I looked closely at the way Nurkse includes or suggests child’s speech. He doesn’t use italics or quotation marks but instead uses indicators like, “she says” and “she orders.” Nurkse keeps the diction simple, minimal and authentic, “It will not count / unless you see,” “see me eat,” “watch.”

Phillips, Carl. *Reconnaissance: Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015

In Carl Phillips’ *Reconnaissance*, punctuation is poetry. With comma after comma, em dashes and lines that push away from the left margin, Phillips’ form echoes the lyric narrative which starts, reconsiders, stops, returns and goes sideways. In “For Night to Fall” (9) the

speaker wrestles with the important difference between history and memory, “what we remember of what happened / is just memory, not history exactly, and / not the past, which *is* truth, but by then // who cared?” The meander of narrative and the unknowing darkness into which it probes recalls the work of Bob Hicock. Emotional conflict recurs throughout the collection, is embodied in the sexual lives of the speakers, in the specific natural objects (magnolias, wild dogs, the sea) that serve as metaphor and setting. Phillips style is marked with attempts to redefine one concept in terms of another; “And you call it / vulnerability. And me calling it rumor passing / through suspicion’s fingers” (34).

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke ; Edited and Translated by Stephen Mitchell ; with an Introduction by Robert Hass.* Vintage Books, 1984.

In this expansive selection representing the body of Rilke’s work, editor and translator Stephen Mitchell has infused Rilke’s language with a freshness that feels contemporary and capable of capturing the turbulence of Rilke’s song. Mitchell’s endnotes and Hass’ introduction provide exquisite detail into Rilke’s life and work, placing him contextually within late 19th Century-early 20th century European poetry, amongst shifting schools (romanticism and modernism) and identifying his influences (Holderlin, Baudelair, Wordsworth) and contemporaries (Verlaine, Nietzsche and Mallarme). The inclusion of several prose excerpts from Rilke’s novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Lavrids Brigge*, further showcases Mitchell’s editorial eye and how even in his prose, Rilke’s themes and subtle rhythms persist. Poetry students will find plenty of sonnets (*Sonnets for Orpheus*), and poems of praise and lament (*Duino Elegies* and *Requiem*).

Saulitis, Eva. *Prayer in Wind*. 1st ed. Boreal Books, 2015.

In *Prayer in Wind*, Saulitis presents over a year and a half of daily poems meditating on the body, illness, nature, family and the afterlife. The small poems expand, boil and distill. Left behind is a scent of incense, a sense of a prayer. Alaska, Hawaii, Upstate New York, and the pastoral countryside of Latvia are landscapes joined by a strong sense of longing, Saulitis' vibrant diction, and incessant probing at memory. I will likely return again and again to the poems exploring her Latvian family and others rooting around in the storied ground of immigration and tradition.

Siken, Richard. *War of the Foxes*. Copper Canyon Press, 2015

In *War of the Foxes* Siken uses the language of visual art to create poems that are paintings, landscapes and anything but still lifes. The poems' speakers engage in acts of imperfect creation as they apply layers of color and meaning. Siken's work lingers in the strangeness (the not-quite right-ness) that exists in the space between things and their artistic representation. The poems contain ekphrastic elements and they engage in conversation with works of art. Siken reveals the unexpected wonders of engaging in creative acts (with a diction steeped in visual art) while constantly questioning intent and challenging the representation. Any poet struggling over subject will marvel at the way Siken's subjects begins with a small focus, then unfurl. What begins with a man in a field ends with an army of conquerors on horseback.

Smith, Maggie. *Good Bones*. Tupelo Press, 2017.

In this collection, both parent and child navigate the world as if it were new to both. Many of the poems emphasize and explore feelings of unpreparedness. The title poem of the collection "Good Bones" represents the conflict a parent considers when faced with the

untiring, existential questions children ask. In marked contrast to a poem like William Stafford's "With Kit Age 7," the parent speaker in "Good Bones" isn't prepared to provide honest, gentle reassurance to a scared child. But rather seems caught up in their own worries and fears, uncertain how to "sell them the world" while keeping the worst of it behind the curtain. Smith's use of the refrain, "though I keep this from my children" is both clever and honest and creates a tongue-in-cheek humor when paired with the laundry list of the atrocities of the world. And yet there are subtle hints of hope hidden in the speaker's humorous tone.

- - -. *Lamp of the Body*. Red Hen Press, 2005.

This collection possesses a very strong sense of place. Evoking the American Midwest, a landscape of oaks, slow rivers, chives and lilacs but also a world echoing parable. Biblical characters crop up consistently, however the slanted perspectives leave uncertain the lessons these ancient stories intend to teach. Smith's language is alive with scent, species and the body, marrow, bone, poison meat. A lyrical treat with a distinct form of rocking couplets and tercets.

Szyborska, Wislawa. *View with a grain of sand: selected poems*. Trans. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh. Harcourt Brace & Company. 1995.

Szyborska's poetry as translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh is accessible, full of lyrical experiments and ekphrastic journeys. The selected poems cover broad emotional terrain from humor to despair and topics ranging from Pi to pornography. The collection would benefit from an introduction by the translators to better place Szyborska contextually in place and time over the forty-year span body of work. Worth noting is that none of the author's earlier works are included (*That's Why We Are Alive*, 1952, *Questioning Yourself*, 1954). Szyborska is a master to be studied for her use of direct address, apostrophe and subtle humor.

Tung-Hui, Hu. *Greenhouses, Lighthouses*. Copper Canyon Press, 2013.

Hu's verse is sparse, imagistic, lyrical and full of meta-text. Narrative moments are heavily reliant on image speak and create a sense of a spliced together film reel with a dubbed audio track. The collection begins and ends in prose with the sections, "Invisible Green" which explore the history of a peculiar lighthouse off the coast of Wales built by a violin maker, it's inhabitants and the abstract concepts of light, communication and influence. Those interested in the way Li-Young Lee, Rilke and Sherwin Bitsui collect fragments and images to stitch together lyric and landscape should make room on their shelves for *Greenhouses, Lighthouses*.

Ueda, Makoto. *Modern Japanese Tanka : An Anthology*. Columbia University Press, 1996

Translator and critic, Ueda presents in a minimalist fashion inspired by short forms of Japanese poetry, four hundred tanka written by twenty modern Japanese poets (1860-1987). The introduction begins by describing the uninspiring state of waka, tanka's precursor, as perceived in 1894 by journalist and poet Yosano Tekkan (who would become a major player in tanka). Ueda lays out the major schools (Modern Romantics/Myojo, Shasei, Shintaishi, Left-Wing, Free-Verse, Modernists and Avant-Garde) that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Differences in subject matter, philosophy, commitment to the 31-syllable structure and politics make the poems presented here quite diverse. Readers may be surprised to learn how popular the poetry forms of haiku and tanka remain in contemporary Japan.

Vang, Burlee. *The Dead I Know : Incantation for Rebirth : Poems*. Swan Scythe Press, 2010.

From the onset, *The Dead I Know : Incantation for Rebirth* faces the brutal history of the Hmong head on. In these poems, the dead are memorialized, through visceral, painful memories, appliqued story cloth and poisoned house ants. The settings vary from Thai jungles along the

Mekong river to a snow covered playground in Fresno. Food and fragrance string these two very different worlds together. Vang's work is also steeped in the wisdom of family. His grandmother and father provide insight into the past, vessels for grief and understanding the suffering of the dead. In the collection's final two poems, "After Our Honeymoon in Laos" and "Night of the Man-Tiger" the tiger of Hmong mythology and the jungles of the region are a springboard for the speaker's transformation. This small volume provides a glimpse into the harsh history of an underrepresented minority, yet it is not despairing.

Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Copper Canyon Press, 2016.

Vuong's poems reflect on identity, sexuality, family origins, trauma as they drift between the U.S. and Vietnam. The poems press fingers into open wounds revealing the interconnectedness of histories, continents, oceans. Vuong's work acknowledges that where we come from is a complicated question but with answers that truly matter. Through fragmented memory, erotic imagery, unexpected metaphor and tender moments between lovers, family, hunter and prey, baker and dough, these poems ruffle and sooth. Formally there are so many wonderful experiments, from cleverly enjambed couplets to haibun and a poem written entirely as footnotes. With a consistently quiet and understated tone, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* offers subtle reassurance that the world and all its collateral damage should give no cause for worry, "Don't be afraid, the gunfire / is only the sound of people / trying to live a little longer / & failing"... "& remember, / loneliness is still time spent / with the world."

Wiegers, Michael (ed). *The Poet's Child*. Copper Canyon Press, 2002.

I came across this book late in my project thanks the recommendation of Joan Kane. Wiegers' introduction describes the warnings given to would-be-parents, e.g. "It's hard

work! There's no time for art," as "unsatisfactory," "sentimental" and "simply insufficient".

This got me thinking of ways in which the poetry of parenthood might deter anyone considering becoming a parent or, in an extreme case serve as a type of birth-control. At the heart of Wiegers' essay are the insights he captures; the way children re-teach us to see and be present in the world; connecting the risk of parenting with that of poetry; and the co-dependence of parents and their children.

Two excerpts from Gregory Orr's "Father's Song" and John Balaban's "Words for My Daughter," are central to the complicated negotiations between parent and child; "I try to teach her caution; / she tries to teach me risk" (Orr, 43) and "I suspect I am here less for your protection / than you are here for mine" (Balaban, 59).

Wilkins, Joe. *When We Were Birds: Poems*. University of Arkansas Press, 2016.

I was drawn to this collection by a series of parenting poems ("Note(s) to my unborn son concerning...," "My Son Asks for the Story about When we were birds," "Colic") which capture the conflict that comes with expecting, preparing for and raising a child amidst "a meanness in the world" (11). But I was struck more by how abstract, brief and not easily connected to the act of parenting some of these poems were. By contrast, the strongest poems in the collection push into experimental territory, blur lines between generations and take on mythic scale. "Ragged Point Road" in particular asks questions and tells a collective history of boys, of which the speaker belongs, raised in the hard country of eastern Montana where they are assaulted by military service, methamphetamine and murder. Mining his memory, the speaker asks "which boy falls to his knees behind his mother's Buick" and "which boy spins and throws at her window but misses every time?" I tried out this technique of obscuring or questioning the actions of a collective of boys behaving badly in my poem, "What Turtle Blood Tastes Like."

The narrative in “Ragged Point Road” is complicated when finding the family car has been egged asks,

....*Who did this, Daddy?*

and *Why?* This light-shot morning
when I say, *Probably a bunch of boys*

and *Because they are boys.*
Like certain kinds of rain

the light this morning
when he claims, though his voice rises

into a question, *But I am a boy?* (104)

Young, Kevin. *Book of Hours*. Knopf, 2014.

My read focused on the section “Confirmation,” which is rich with the themes of expecting and early parenthood from a father’s perspective. The section is complicated by the opening poem which is set off from the others as a painful prequel of loss, “Miscarriage.” Young’s portrait of the anxiety of anticipation (“Expecting,” “Ultrasound,” “Labor Day,” “Breaking Water”) and shock of birth (“Crowning,”) include the honest uncertainty of a new parent that I will investigate in my thesis essay. I’m also intrigued by poems like, “Beasting” and “Teething” (which is actually three poems) in which the primal, animal needs of a child lead to an exhausted delirium that leads the parent speaker to question the child’s origins and the parent’s role in satisfying the needs of these strange creatures.

Zucker, Rachel. *The Museum of Accidents*. Wave Books, 2009.

Zucker’s poems put parenthood in the crosshairs. In a manic, self-critical voice these poems examine the less bright side of birth and parenting, the postpartum, post-traumatic and most importantly how we are changed as parents. Zucker’s parent speakers question their

capacity/ability to raise children, struggle with mental health and frame writing and parenting as contesting emergencies. The erratic forms of *Museum of Accidents* reveals brutally authentic and flawed portraits of parents that subvert sentimentality. I found these perspectives refreshing and the collection was pivotal in the development of my thesis essay.

What Turtle Blood Tastes Like

Poems

*I suspect I am here less for your protection than you
are here for mine, as if you were sent to call me back
into our helpless tribe.*

—John Balaban “Words for my Daughter”

What Turtle Blood Tastes Like

They believed no one could see
them beneath the willow temple,
down by the algae bloom swamp.

They believed if they all drank
of that blood and that swamp water,
they might keep the darkness submerged.

One of their fathers told them,
You can't swim in there shoe-
less, snappers'll get yer toes.

Pike in the night could be heard
when they fell from their brief orbit
through galaxies of mosquitos.

Who was first to lift the rock high?
Who snatched the slick creature from the cool mud
at the brown edge of the water?

They'd been told some kids deserved
a good beating, just as they likely
deserved what they had coming.

From above which boy's head did gravity,
granite and a blow from kids playing
god fall down on mossy diamond shell?

The sound was green wood cracking.
They remember purple blood and sick
tears, the beaked mouth kept on snapping.

When one boy threw the broken
turtle back in the swamp, he became
the one with blood on his hands.

Going Over

Even bird wings, bones porous
as coral, the lightness and flight
nested in honeycomb hollows

are bound to fail and fall. No longer
part of the sky just a tangle
in the grass that chokes

the mower's blades with feather and bone. Beak
and blood. Enough leg left to free from the machine,
and toss into the woods where once

life was different. Into a time
when the woods were an edge
we wanted to fall over—

into that wellspring
of mosquitoes, poison
ivy and leeches, it was our place.
A place parents didn't go.

When we went over
and looked back,
we saw that we'd
never really seen

how big the world could
be, but we knew how
to leave it behind
like a jacket at recess

and down in the leaf litter,
scurrying out of the swamp holes,
we picked skunk cabbage blossoms,
called them stink bombs

and the trees weren't just trees
they were climbers or sappers
weren't yet birches and pines,
were only hard ribbons of roots

in soft earth hiding
a seam, some slight dip where
a chill and names rose

into daylight,

beech and walnut wind,
willow and sugar maple.
We peeled back birch bark,
to start fires, with the oily paper

skin and pine pitch. Given
space to cuss, fight and piss, to scar
with paintballs, slingshots, pocket knives—
to climb quickly and without caution.

Her Story

Mociute unwrapped
her memories, gold foil
falling away, butterscotching
my sister and me with her hard-sweet
voice, *because we melted, we survived.*
We were amber tough when it was needed,
sweet too when it sufficed,
and we'd seen both sides, the crisp linen
of her blouse, powdered hands,
skin soft over bird-like Baltic bones.

We chewed them like bitter candy,
Mociute's memories, her awkward English.
Though they cast our tiny Midwestern world
into strange light, as years of history
lessons unraveled in an afternoon.

The formal house in Ohio filled with war
and displacement, our inheritance.
In her story, Nazis were the lesser devils, somehow gave
my Grandparents refuge. And they crossed
the Baltic. The Atlantic.

We were dazed by tentative bites
of pickled whitefish with homemade horseradish,
beets and red beans, duck meat and mint jam.
Disoriented by alternative histories
and blurry memory maps.

In *Mociute's* house,
my sister and I became *Laurita* and *Jonukus*—
left the Midwest for Lithuania.

Mociute: Grandmother *Laurita*: Little/Dear Lauren *Jonukus*: Little John

When We Were Winged

we flung ourselves to edges
and over gliding, our scapulae
extended, rigid and feathered.

We flew toward whatever
work and promise might
pay us our worth for this
labor of lifting and traversing
gapped-earth—
gorges, canyons, ravines.

With wings we were quicker
than ferryman, tug or barge.
Less likely to dump our cargo
deep into river, sea or ether.

Winged we were without
our own burden, flight left
us light even when loaded,
circling low to land amidst
wingless dock-hands.

Muscled but meek,
we could see their heavy-hearts
try and lift out of their chests
when we beat our departure
onto the wind and rose.

View from Right

In the swirling dust of shallow right field, I was near enough to the pop of hard leather on the catcher's softer leather, a little lost in the smartass static of *hey batter* chatter, all our cheeks stuffed with sunflower seeds. Blowing Bazooka bubbles. Coconut

breeze from the first base bleachers where the second baseman's sixteen-year-old sister tracked the sun instead of our game, and so didn't see me stealing her signs, squinting at her reddening freckled chest from the crabgrass outfield, in the company of dandelions.

I watched her and grew dizzy, baking in the Michigan sun, the smell of lilac laundry soap and glove oil rising off me. She raised a sweaty bottle of Faygo cola to her lips, lowered painted lashes, ginger hair on bare shoulders. I was so thirsty. The mercy

rule ended the game early. I watched more girls than I watched ball games that long summer years before I knew the damage an ineptly pinned carnation and blood could cause a marigold yellow dress. Before I learned mascara-tears were harder to clean than grass stains.

You Saw Me

I was a tidepool sculpin, a scurrying
blur among slippery stones, hungry
for the world of light, beyond
the barnacle and bladderwrack.

I was a spined, maligned
and typically tossed-back fish,
aching for some sharp pierce.

A glimpse beyond fin and gill.
And with my parietal eye I sensed you
were a heron,
walking on water,

legs like fragile piers,
golden eye scanning shallows,
tufted feathers at your throat
alive like surf.

Stealth and slack tide,
I might be murk in the blurry margins,
plant or mud or rock,

somehow you saw me
for the fish I was. Ready
for you and your spearing beak
to target the push of my heart,
carry me out of this shallow world.

This is all I longed for
when I was a tidepool sculpin.

Where God Was

I responded, at first, to the call, to the Priest and Deacon, their role in the deity drama, the congregation, humble, submissive, lifted their voices into the thick air— heavy wood rafters, blood-colored glass, the world beyond the church, altered— censer dashed like a weapon against vice, choking wake of incense, repentance.

Through the doorway tucked behind the altar, robed clergy and altar boys materialized— I tried to believe— God lurked behind that door, voice piped-in, angry organ played blind by a Polish seminarian until one day I stopped singing— stopped feeling any meaning in the mumbled chorus of the congregation, who did they think was listening?

Even up close, taking wafer and wine, I couldn't get anywhere close to knowing why what had once given comfort—conversations with myself, eyes turned inward, now left me

hollow. Lord? Hear this prayer?

Dirt Work

I

You sent me
 for seeds, I failed
to see you
 meant it was time to dig
deeper, to take root.

While I was away
 you worked the dirt,
your swollen fingers and a rusty shovel
 folded kelp and chum salmon

into the raised beds
 where our seeds
would soon sprout, would transform
 us too. On my scribbled list

even the names sprouted
 origin stories before they were sown

*Formanova beets, White Russian
kale, Renegade beans,
Siberian garlic.*

When I found you
 in the garden, on your knees
I brought tiny offerings in brown paper
 Each packet, a sort of prayer—
verses of soil temperature, and planting depth.

Propagation.

II

We made dirt
 into dinner. Seeds and sprouts, root deep
 down dark
 finger thick, fragrant
when twisted loose to be rinsed and roasted.
So much more summer

than we believed possible.
 Can we can up all this
bounty, before September slugs set in?

We made ourselves kale
 or at least ate enough
to be changed, protein charged, charting.

The two of us, eating for three. Fall turning
into winter, we turned to potato, garlic gnocchi—
 no key
to survival but at least a break from salmon.

 Our calendars force four seasons
onto this wet world
but who are we kidding?
 Transformations mark time, belly
 blossoms, aching back. Seasons
are slippery, unpredictable. Leaf fall bleeding color into early snow.

Only humans could hope for neat seasons, summer
bookended by memorials and celebrations of labor.
Some careful cleaving of a year, like a cantaloupe
quartered and shared.

 That long season of waiting and measuring, we
ate so many potatoes. Cast-iron Dutch oven
stewing chicken thighs, Brussels sprouts.

That season of your sprouting,
Sustained by the labor of our garden. Planting
names now into the air.

Reading seed catalogs, origin
stories of potatoes we hoped
 could root, could hold,
Irish Cobbler, Detroit Red, Holland Longbush.

Lily Bud

This path is a braided way,
through dawn-dark,
salmonberry-tangle and thorn,
from cedar house to mud beach.

In the shade grow chocolate
lilies, *fritillaria affinis*.
Lance-like leaf-whorls and speckled
tepals drip last night's rain.

I remember the midwife
tell me, "the cervix is like a flower."
Like this fetid
wildflower I wonder?

I sit down
on path
beside this lily
beside this greening ground

and I sip tea.
Tea of steeped swollen
flowers, mouth full of mint
and clouds

of hot breath
billow onto
a bowed
brown bud.

If her cervix is like
these lilies,
today our baby
will come.

Sounding

A hummingbird's wings,
a baby's heart, my ear
pressed to her slick belly—
listening.

Ways We Connect

I twist the lid off
so many jars, POP.

Pureed peas
spread across the
small table, the smell
of summer.

The birds of his hands tuck their wings,
bunched fingertips touching thumbs,
come together, connect, plug in,
more.

Then they fly off,
only one hand returns,
to touch five fingers to lips,
again, and again,
eat, eat.

I build bridges
between the small jar
and his wide mouth.
This food, these signs,
a language we share.

His face, now
creamed in green,
his mouth spreads
not-quite speechless.
His hands full of words

flutter up again, *more.*
I reach out and brush
peas from his raised eyebrow.
His gaped mouth follows
my hand on its return
to the spoon. These winter
dark mornings I spoon him summer
while the wings of his hands
touch and dart, asking for *more,*
more, more.

We Keep the Liquor in the Laundry Room

a crooked porch at the back of the house,
where the dying washer cycles,
bucks and jumps, liquor bottles
on the counter clank and kiss.

The whirl, creak and groan of drive-belt rubbing
a rustic, erotic, mechanical ritual,
tired clutch groping, pump sucking
and the whole house swaying a little,
weak-kneed but strong,
leaning into hard but necessary work.

Load the wash, steal a swig,
extra soap for the shitty diapers,
some Boatright Bourbon or
wash-day white tequila.

We wash it all together on cold.

With two boys, always butt-sliding,
puddle-jumping, kneeling
in muddy gardens murdering slugs,
or in peaty blueberry thickets,
we do laundry almost every day.

So much laundry. Sorting and folding
tiny underpants, wool socks, Carhartts.
Raising solitary toasts to grit.

Watcha doin' back there, Dad?

Lost in a familiar rhythm, lilac bloom of detergent,
some softener for fabric, some for this life.
Cork the Boatwright, set it down slow,

Lean hard against the rocking washer,
savor the sound of swaying glass bottles,

Laundry, son.

All Under

after Dylan Thomas

Milk jug warms
on counter, condensing.
Milk-sweat on maple,
cherry, alder, on cutting
board. Poured
milk makes brown
of coffee black.

Under the kitchen, the milk, the Cheerios box,
the boiler boils, burns diesel once burned coal,
certainly soothed wool-wrapped dreamers
waking blurry-eyed on the soft side
of single-pane windows to light coal-black
fires and warm soot-colored coffee.
In this kitchen watched tiny lights
bob on the barely afloat boats
tied to sinking docks
in the windward bay.

Seven blocks above the bay,
yet well-setting below where first light
makes morning-orange over mountains
I pour cereal and milk into favorite
bowls, pack lunches, dry clothes.

Under me, under the kitchen, the fir floor,
cast iron pulse, beast boiler
waking, warming these rooms, where
soon, I must rouse
sleepers from blanketed dream
dens, bundle and battle them doorways
and rainward into the day.

Scale

We're making the world,
so far only as big as this puzzle

map of the United States, nearing complete
except we are missing

Rhode Island. All week
Oscar overturned the house, interrogated the cat, cried.

There should be fifty pieces he tells me, *why did they make it*
so small he demands to know. There have been so many puzzles, so many lost

pieces. I tell him we might never find it. Suggest we trace and replace it
with cardboard, we can even paint it Atlantic blue.

His face says that I am a Dad lacking understanding. My face says I am a kid
in P-Town on a whale watching tour watching a very tall and a very small man open

arms and mouths, they become oceans and a blue whale breaches and I am maybe
thirteen instead and puzzled and more concerned over body fat and lean muscle than whales

breaching in the shag ocean of the living room rug the cat Zeus emerges with Rhode Island
in his paws, bats the ocean state into the air and onto the hardwood where it slides, our eyes

go with it hoping we don't lose it to the black hole under the cast iron radiator. I got it.
Rhode Island in hand, it's winter in Alaska and we're piecing back together Oscar's world.

On the map Alaska is floating out in the south Pacific, out of scale and somewhere near Hawaii.
I tell him our own hometown, Juneau, is twice as big as Rhode Island, thinking this might help

somehow with the problem of projection. It doesn't. In his Rhode Island blue eyes
he's swimming with dolphins and planting cacao seeds and big island dreams

in this thin Alaskan soil. *Wait*, he tells me. *So where's Juneau?* Now he's a puzzle, wondering
how this place, his home, all he knows, though also somehow tiny, could feel so large.

Some questions are best answered with silence and window gaze.
Oscar finds Florida, Georgia. Alabama panorama, Kentucky is lucky and laughs.

I lock two more states
into place, *Virginia and West Virginia*.

He smiles, says, *They're brovers*

just like the Norf and Souf Carolina

where 'Ciute and 'Vukas live!

Even kids can connect the dots, can find homes for missing puzzle pieces, empty
spaces. We've united the states, but Oscar wants to know *what's that yellow on the edges?*
Were 'Ciute and 'Vukas borned in Souf Carolina or Michigan or Lifuania? Is this, off the map,
the rest of the world? What does it mean to live off the edges
of this map, of what isn't lost in the living room rug?

Canada and Mexico, I tell him are here and here. You have to start small,
close to home. Then you can handle the rest of it.

Where is Lifuania anyway Dad?
I point at New York harbor

and sail my finger as far as I can
into the north Atlantic and over the edge

onto the white shag rug and then off

onto the worn oak hardwood. This nailhead
right here, I tell him. Lithuania is right about here.

But it's so tiny!

But it's not that small, more like this
and I uproot West Virginia,

fly it across an imagined Europe

and plant it on the shore
of the Baltic Sea.

Lesser Devils

No, the Soviets never sent
my grandparents on the Siberia-bound
trains though they were well-educated,
bilingual and Lithuanian.

The Germans, too had not condemned
my *Mociute* and *Tevukas* as Russian [Mociute: grandmother, *Tevukas*: grandfather]
spies, nor had the *Kaunas*
health sciences campus crumbled
under shells like St. Petersburg had,

so *Tevukas*— only recently declared
Dr. Antonas Azelis, M.D. —insisted with lucidity,
on an emergency appendectomy, but without sedation
for fear of shelling.

—

A hundred miles outside Kaunas, the Red
Army prepared for its second
march to the Baltic.

A meal of canned pork and cabbage,
tin mugs of weak smoky tea.

—

In *Tevukas*' waking surgical
dream, he becomes a dandelion gone
to seed, blown and set adrift, over
wheat and canola fields: watches
so many sickles turn grass and flower
to stubble. Wince of pain rising
through locally anesthetized parts.

Homeland to the east in tatters, under the thin topical
numbness of lignocaine, the hospital
shakes, turns out friends he's trusted
into the world, where he sees them wave

white flags toward surging front.
They greet lesser devils, consider
that one boot on their throat
might be better than another.

Iron rails lead to the far Eastern
edge of the continent, some less-certain
darkness amidst swarming black
flies and spruce, some biting death on ice.

With the diseased appendix extracted, *Tevukas*
and *Mociute* crouched hidden together in a car
with no seats, car meant for contraband not passengers.

A hundred kilometers to the border
of Latvia, a hundred more by foot
through black alder, birch and night.
Entire villages cleared by conscription—
Nazis always near.

They limp ragged
into Riga, are greeted as refugees,
offered shelter. And learn to wait.

Ships depart daily. Only arrivals
are news of their sinking.

I wonder if *Tevukas*
let anyone see that once-raw
wound, that place where he
let himself be opened.

Before I was *Jonas*, before
my *Mociute* had a daughter who would become
my mother, still new herself to being called *Mamiete*,

[mother]

she declared herself
Eugenia Liauba Azelis,
boarded the America-bound

USAT *General R. L. Howze* for boiling seas,
where the Baltic would become
North Atlantic steel.

From Bremen to Brooklyn under care,
of an American captain
who fashioned dream from paper,

his own children far from there.
Uncle *Leonas*— a toddler
born in exile— sat

at his mother's feet, eyes wide as questions,
following the flight of paper airplanes
thrown from top bunks.

Mociute attended English lessons,
where soldiers called the students
the best-dressed refugees,

gathered them on bottom bunks,
had them repeat
practical phrases:

My children are hungry.
I am a doctor.
I also speak German, Russian and French.
Please, I am a married woman.

Wind God

Once when wind was worshipped, feared
and kneeled before, trees were all hard,

bark wounded, rigid, never rendered a shimmer
of shade. Birds were only birds and never

blurred memories of leaves leaping on stems ends, never variegated
edges, veins flexing, flesh uncertain

as seasons once were. When wind pressed itself hard
against the land, its disciple the rain drove into every fissure,

each weak point in the skin of the earth. Once when green
was spring and fire meant fall, a fury of color masked decay

deep inside, all that was only just born, budding and fearless.

In the church of that once when world, bells high in timbered tower
rang themselves ragged in the gust and gale. Those who kneeled

before the altar of hand-sawn planks, nailed between two bare birches,
they huddled deep in wool blankets, placed shanks of mutton in blood

spotted burlap upon the red wood at the feet of the windward forest.
Each offering wrapped in prayer, each veiled memory, slipped inside

the white down of a cottonwood bud. All of what once was yielding,
hardened over, a burl covered wound, a feather in amber. Fear of stillness,

and of lightness, vulnerable and in danger of the wind's bullying press.
In the world before wind was commandment, there were days so still and warm

and full of birds they were assembled and called summer.

Ways to Say Please

Listen, *Jonukas*

and I try, strain so my ears and brain
might make story sense of my *Mociute*'s words
rushing at me in three languages.

A braided current of code-switch,
a home before war, when first love,
and rapeseed fields still bloomed at solstice.

Before borders opened like revolving doors,
survival requiring the sense to adapt. To know
when to say *bitte*, *pozhaluysta*, *prashau*,

a slow river of *please*, the Nemunas flowing from Kaunas to the Curonian lagoon.

When we sailed from Bremen I left
that cursed language behind—speaking German
saved my life—or cursed it, it's difficult to say...

...It served its purpose,
and I remember hoping the next language
life would have me wear

would serve me better
and with less consequence.
We have always been a people

between worlds, and in America,
when I am mistaken for Russian
I close my eyes,

touch this *karoliai gintaris*
my mother gave me, *aš meldžiوسي*,
I pray.

bitte, *pozhaluysta*, *prashau*: please in German, Russian, Lithuanian
karoliai gintaris: amber necklace

Timeless

after Jim Harrison

Like you, I'm always trying to fall
away from the measured movement of time,
off calendars, between the hands of clocks.

Am puzzled by the blur of good light
and long thought that stretch out
on the spare sun of January this far north.

Oh, to walk out in the morning
and for it to be enough
for those who love me to know
I will be back,
later...

not by lunch or by dark or dinner,
but later-- when enough has become enough
and I've grown tired of the wander of a game
trail or the meander of the wrack line.

To return home and to the thousand
things when the tide says there's no more
beach here, or the moon sets and there's no shimmer
of hoarfrost on old snow to light the way.

I'll return, come home,
get to work, play with my boys,
work on the house, get dinner started,
love my wife the way she deserves—
our hands and bodies slip
free from the frame of time.

Five and Nine

[Five]

Five is ready for kindergarten and chess,
for charging down the upper mountain on skis—
for finally getting past four and a half.

Ready always to play, still learning to lose.
Ready for full-contact with his brother, rage
ready but still scared of the fallout. Not ready

to say sorry, far from it. Ready to put on a suit
with suspenders and bow tie. Ready to call it his jazz
man zoot suit. Ready to drum and ready to sing

louder than life, *I don't care*
what Mama don't allow,
I'm gonna play my drums anyhow!

[Nine]

A storm enters the confines
of the kitchen, its windows
loose and single paned
rattle in their frames.

His is the generation
of upsurge, severe turbulence,
squinting, bed-headed boy,
spectacle born to me, less

level-headed, less reserved
and, despite ample warning
something to be reckoned
with if I fail to batten down.

—

Tonight, on stage, he's Zeus
but also, somehow still
my son, red-cheeked and shining.
Thunder god incarnate.

Zeus hasn't come down from Olympus to talk about his father

drama, or about girls— sure, he's a bit girl crazy lately, but the real reason he's speaking to mortals is to discuss the FAQs on his Twitter feed.

Zeus Tweets to his mortal fan base, picks up vegetarian girls on hikers.com.

But Zeus is also my Finn, how he's become nine alludes me, but he's wearing a bed sheet and leather sandals, is arm in arm with Calisto.

Calisto is his friend and neighbor, starry eyed for him since she was four, long before he became Zeus, and made her a bear to protect her from Hera's wrath. He can't save Calisto from her son's angry arrow so, to appease his critics placed her amongst the stars.

Arrival

Is it the reddening blueberry
branches pushing tender pink blossoms?

Or the violet crocus
spiking through March snowpack
toward lengthening light?

Perhaps it's in the shock and flood
of a *Pineapple Express* windstorm,
warm rain on corn snow,
a hot blast on our
Southeast Alaskan faces.

Probably it comes with the arrival
of Girl Scout cookies, the tangle
of coconut and caramel

and a Cactus League
radio broadcast riding AM static
and bat crack
through the first open
window since flu season.

Uncle

Paralytic Poliomyelitis, the way it rolled off my mother's tongue,
could have been Lithuanian, when she whispered,
“polio from the vaccine.” One night I saw

my uncle's shriveled right leg, exposed through the crack
in the armor of his bedroom door. I'll forget the details of his face
before I forget the pale skin, the sparse dark hair,

a simple crutch beside the bed. Sweat-stained wood, foam rubber—familiar
as the nighttime route to the bathroom, lean and hop to tiled darkness, relief.
Morning, dependable as the backup brace, warming embrace

steel and leather, hidden beneath the bed.
I'll forget his tenor laugh and the nicotine yellow lenses of his glasses
before shaking the sound of that brace.

Coil and release of springs, pop of destroyed knee joint,
his stiff way scared us kids when he reached
for his knee to lock some unseen metal hinge.

Subway trains were his first taste of fast. Deep beneath New York,
a strange new world. Riding with his mother, emerging
from the dark tunnel, into the light, bridging the Harlem River.

If he could conquer the stairs, he was free, fast as the blue blur
of an express charging past his stop on the far track.
Like a flashbulb, those trains, they lit the world in a new light.

In all other light he moved slowly. Slow legs, but quick hands.
When we visited, we asked him to be the machine.
Approaching him slow with hesitation, chuckling before

our pressing of his nose activated a blur of arms.
As the tickle machine, my uncle was too quick for us
but never fast enough

as a boy to evade the outbreak of fists, sticks and stones
of the school yard. In the dirt, under the strain he closed
his eyes, imagined he might run

them down, twist their arms until they cried *Uncle*.
Moving to Cleveland eradicated some symptoms, but cruelty
cannot be vaccinated against.

As kids we were never fast enough to escape
the flashbulb of his cameras when the time would come to pose
for the family picture before going home. Though sometimes we moved just enough

to blur. I can see the soft denim stretched where pockets
squared and stretch over his Marlboros, can see chrome
peek out of the garage, the grill and fender of his Oldsmobile 442

When he fired it up, leaned out the window and revved
the super duty V8, he was back on those Bronx bound
trains, had slipped into a quickening world.

Trains, flashbulbs and muscle cars dilated
my uncle's eyes. But fast was, for him, always
just out of reach.

Deferred Maintenance

Out back the world is winter-bare
branches of mountain-ash stirring,
is redpolls landing, goat's beard
and salmonberry stalks leaning.

A finger of the Pacific,
the coast mountains
and this city clinging between.

But I struggle to stay
focused on that world out there,
beyond these walls, this roof
and the demands of this house.

This crooked, needy centenarian,
its varicose veins of nylon-wrapped wire
meandering through holes bored
with hand drills through rough-cut
old-growth lumber, the wave break
circles of saw kerfs in the grain.

And hidden in the vermiculite,
legacy of Libby, Montana-
Sleeps the suppressed memory of the summer
we naively bought this broken house,
began picking its scabs.

In this house I sit to write, listen and
push outward. I try hard to see only
my children riding snowy hills
or picking winter rose-hips
in the park across the street.

But instead can only make lists,
lumber needs for a deck,
linear feet of siding, thinking projects
through backwards, unbuilding to
better see the layers,
until my eyes glaze, my waking
reduced to crudely drawn diagrams
and cut lists.

The feeling that my mind is on its belly,
motion, meaning and music, restricted.
Crawling through low spaces,

below cold rooms, knob and tube nightmares,
rubbing against rotting wood,
rusted cast iron rain.

A boiler built for coal,
burns heating oil now,
at the raging-hot heart of this house,
forces steam into singing radiators.

This soft hiss of steam
a song of sorts, the flawed house
warming on me, my eyes
beginning to turn outward again,
finally grasping the allure
of deferring maintenance.

What it Was

It was a neck massager, it was purple.
It was switchable, as in it had an on/off switch. It was battery powered.
It was a fourth grade Montessori classroom, it was a public school.
It was my son and his friends that brought it there, it was these boys,
it was their laughter and their voices chopped by the vibrating of it,
it was relief, the letting down of the tightness in their young neck muscles,
it was the warmth of it, the soft buzzing rubber, it was goosebumps risen.

It was bundled in a grocery bag of garage sale yarn. It was uncovered years later, the yarn
it was musty, it was hidden within and promptly again hidden and forgotten.

It was fortunate there was a substitute teacher that day, or maybe
It was unfortunate—the sub decided to let this one go. It was not a stone he would be turning.
It was safe to say the boys' regular teacher would have handled it with grace. With care,
it was certain, she would have known how to bring the physical and emotional pleasure
it was designed to evoke, to the forefront of the peculiar object.
It was our bodies, she would have told them, that deserve to feel good and that
it was nothing to be ashamed of, but it was private and sacred. But
it was a substitute witness lacking substitute wisdom so their teacher's kindness,
it was something that wasn't given that day.

It was not his teacher, but his mother who helped him understand what it was. Sugar coating
it was not her style. It was a sex toy, she told him. It was confusion on his face.
It was okay, she told him, to touch, to explore, to learn to feel, it would make sense someday.
It was an equation he couldn't figure. Though he could make sense of sex. He knew
it was what a penis and a vagina were made to do. But a toy? Was this what
it was meant to do? How could a play thing be a sex thing? My poor son's head hurt.
It was why he wasn't at school the next day.

It Matters

Round and round, laughter,
footfalls, screams and slammed
doors, *ouch* and *stupid poopy head*.

Saturday morning sounds,
the nine A.M. variety, less muted
than the seven A.M. variety which typically involves
the cello and violin battle, small kids
with instruments, the inevitable
breakage of fragile objects.

If I can get coffee before
the first scream, before the first
Mommy call echoes through
the house, then I am only
slightly more ready

to face the uphill climb
of a day of parenting.

My wife, bless her heart,
insists I'm not enough involved,
a spectator really, an anxious one
at that and she's right, yet

I couldn't face it
day in, day out with-
out knowing how much
it matters, this measured chaos,

Monopoly games at 6 in the morning,
Pokémon Go walks in sideways rain,
the need to comfort a fallen and bruised
boy, yet again with the kind of healing

touch only I can bring, despite
my disconnection, my lack
of first-aid training, somehow I

can be all that these boys need, some-
how an equilibrium is reached.

Night School

I
lie.
I mean
the other kind,
lay. I want to know
how to lay beside my children.
Not merely beside, but close and tender enough to feel,
this is what dads do. Put my nose in their hair, smell the way they move through water,
light. No more bristling when our cold bare skin connects. All my attempts, gestures, prayers,
give them less warmth than my cradled arm beneath their sleeping heads.

Where
should
I put
this heavy
handed arm of mine?
Here? Can he even raise his ribs
under the weight of my over-thought, calculated
tenderness? I pretend my touch will steady his ragged breathing, repel his nightmares.

There is
no wrong
way to hold
these children tonight.
Hypnotized by my voice, the smell of paper, light touch of reading lamp, a softness I'm circling,
less awkward, more nature than nurture. Some nights they reach out and hold me, will not
let go. I try not to memorize the placement of their hands on my body, but instead feel
the need, not the weight. I've got a lot to learn.

Snow Dance

We ask the sky
if it remembers snow.

It is mute, darkening—
leaning in to hear the voices,
of a man and his sons.

How do we snow dance, Dad?
Yeah, this hill needs some snow for sledding
and angel making!

Arms up, fingers spread
to tickle the scowl
from the clouds,

like this, I signal the boys,
I twirl, I tickle, I sing—badly,
Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

My boys mirror me, lift
their arms, twirl, tickle, and sing. Oscar says,
I know the sky will be laughing snow now!

Overhead, cottonwoods are watchmen
they shiver limbs, last yellow
leaves tumble. Fickle afternoon

light, lost behind grey mountains
and at the bottom of this hilltop town
the ocean, sable, still.

We hold our arms high
waiting to catch what is let down.

Bruised clouds being to lighten,
sky at last—begins to laugh.

Our feet make small circles
on the frosted ground, our hands
conduct ritual tickling—

Night settles. Down-
soft flakes, snow on our faces.

Keeping Control

Son, our human bodies are time-bombs. All around us, family, friends— detonating even if our own body-bombs have years left on the clock,

we are full of destructive potential and shrapnel. Hope in God has been scientifically proven to be less effective than a placebo

in the control group. Even less effective against shrapnel, though I keep this from you. No one is in control. I appreciate your belief in me as your father, but believe me

when I tell you my control over you is tenuous. I am in complete control, complete control of very little other than the dog or cat and really, I rarely have any control of them or myself

for that matter. After all who wants to be in control? Control is a cage for responsibility, though I keep this from you. Some days I hear my own time-bomb

ticking furiously. I lose track of time every day. Responsibility is always knowing what day it is when you ask. Time management is an essential survival skill

but will do very little to keep the time in the bomb managed, keep it from marching on, expiring. To explode is to relinquish control. I worry constantly about exploding, so feign

control, though I keep this from you. I hope I'm not in the control group. This look on my face is me showing you what control should look like.

Undertow

When I say *I am sleeping*
I mean I am slipping
and a shore is not unlike a bed
and the undertow drawing me deeper
is not unlike the sweat of a breathless dream.

When I say *I am working*
I mean I am wondering
and the work of following the thread of a thought
wondering its way to the edge of my head
at the end of the day is hard!

When I am working
with wonder I'm rarely ever done.

I may say *I am done*,
but I really mean I am doing all I can.

When I say *I am ambitious*
I mean I am anxious, ever so anxious
about slipping and sleeping,
working and wondering,
doing and done.

When I say *I am*,
really I am always enroute
to tomorrow or next Tuesday,
instead of here, in this house,

in this focused light.

When I say *I am living*
I mean I am learning
and learning is not unlike hiding
from what I already know
and hiding is not unlike walking
right up to the banker and turning out empty pockets
or to the teacher and shaking out blurry verse.

When I say *I'm a Dad* I mean I'm
playing catch, and catch-up, putting on band-aids,
trying not to curse too much, drinking lots of beer.
When I say *I'm a Dad* I mean I'm bound
to my pack. I'm growing gray, and fabricating

fictions for my boys and for myself every day.

When I say *I am concluding*
what I mean is I am conducting

a symphony which is not unlike a tsunami

and the cellos are not unlike a soaring warning siren suggesting high ground,
and by high ground I mean a vantage point for viewing the crash that comes at the end.

On a Kite String

This poem and this dying
dog and my they-look-just-like-you
boys. Their waking and their vitamins.

Their rice krispies and raisin bagels, their Magic
Treehouse and Olympians and their bedtimes.
Dying dog and his— our— my— pills.

The dog's pills and my addiction,
in his cataract mirrors I see
and hate myself for blaming the dog.

Cocktail of shame, hope, *just*
die dog, *die*.

And the joy of dog walks even though I'm walking
a dying dog on failing legs. That pained tail
tuck and then the vomit pile,

kibble and pills,
this anxiety, this poem.

This secret need to swerve, highly functional
addict, reckless. High at work,
blurry commutes on stud-rutted roads.

The dying dog and his eyes,
growing rounder and hollower
each dulling day. The dog and his daily

meds, two buttered up tramadol. One for me so I could see
through world blur and empty, wet eyes,
sent up on a kite-string all day.

How I blurred and softened hard edges
believed the smell of morning
sea fog, the sound of my son's cello,
cup of coffee and a kiss from my wife

were not enough. Beach barbecues and knee
high rye grass hiss. Kids leaping
creeks, topping boots and building fires.
I cracked and vanished so many sweaty beers, roasted hot
dogs and salmon on coals. Sunset on snow

caps. Why wasn't this enough?

Big white peaks edge into sky, little white caps roughen the water,
little white pills in my pocket, in me, in the ashes
of dog taken away on the wind.

[And I like my father]

And I, like my father
have raised children and bottles,
bourbon and breast milk, though not formula, but, like him, I am fallible. Forever
pressing up against Peter and Neverland.

Repulsed by responsibility and compulsively,
repulsively, hitched to this place, these children, these heart, bone and want houses,
these mortgages, emotional and otherwise.

And I, like my father
only rarely

have slept on the couch after too much raising
of children and bottles and Cain. Love is eating
thoughts, words. Is taking back what is spit in *I don't want to grow up!* fits.

Never near when needed, and *just go, please*. A part of me, like my father
too much to handle, and why
handle what's broken
with care anyway?

Before You Ask

*I don't even know how to match my socks.
Go ask your mother. She laughs and says,
I did. Mom told me to come and ask you.*
-Joe Mills "How You Know"

Son, you are likely to think
this life is a puzzle, with so many missing
pieces, so you should know who to turn to
when nothing fits together.

Your mother will be straight
with you as certain as I will be half
listening and reluctant. Before you doubt
this remember when you were eight

she laid the words, *vagina*,
penis and *vibrator* on you? Remember
just last night how hard you laughed when your little
brother asked if babies came out of butt cracks

and how your mother clarified for him the map
of a woman's underside, *vulva*, *urethra*, *vagina*, *perineum*, *anus*.
How his nose wrinkled, and one eyebrow raised as he began to put together
the pieces. Realized his kindergarten teacher was pregnant, wondered how that happened?

So, before you ask me about what causes depression or your grandpa
about his weight or his heart, consider whether you want stories
or if you want answers? I don't mean to say stories never end
with answers, but the answers come quicker when you ask your mother

instead. She won't hesitate to tell you how dark winter gets,
how the lack of light and stress of work and you kids can make brains
back-fire. She'll cut quick through grandpa's shit, tell you straight that he's too heavy—
that his heart is failing and he's not getting enough oxygen so his brain too is getting slow.

Your mother wants to arm you
with truth. Prepare you— I guess. Which
isn't to say that what I want for you is fiction
but I'm afraid you know too much already

and maybe are not ready to face the worst
of this world, not yet. You're a smart kid
and will probably find a way to side-step

some of the gut-punches on the way.

So let's go back to what I said
about your mother. Before
you go ask her, ask yourself
if you're ready to know.

Tree houses, Shipwrecks and Magic

A moment alone, living room emptied of life, growing still.
First house, first starry-eyed moments of the new year
King Julian, bless his meerkat heart, granted us a gift—
a New Year countdown on demand. So at 9:30 we hid

all the clocks in the first house, starry-eyed, nearing a new year
a five-minute dance party and then all the kids sent to bed
the New Year counted already down and hidden by 9:30
pumpkin pie and bedtime-sounds thick in the air, out from oven and under doors.

Our five-minute dance party, stilled and settled, all the kids in bed
hushed crinkle of turning pages, touching licked fingertips to paper
pumpkin pie and bedtime-sounds slip beneath the bedroom door.
With murmured voices, dream seed stories are given.

Hush and hear crinkle of paper, fingertips licked, pages turn
and tree houses, shipwrecks and magic, these kids not yet
tired of murmured voices dream seeding stories
not yet too old or cool to wear zip up pajamas.

Tree houses, shipwrecks and magic, these kids not yet
ready to take the needle-bare Christmas tree down
not yet. Zip up pajamas are still cool, never too old
to believe Santa flies a floatplane, a sack load of new skis in back.

I was the only one ready to take down the Sitka Spruce
Finn called the training tree. The neighbors laughed, Oscar yelled,
Santa flies a floatplane, he's bringing new skis!
Yelled *ouch* every time he got too close to the bright, blinking tree.

Finn called it the training tree and we laughed. At the neighbors
my wife drank wine with the wives, their husbands, gone hunting caribou.
Oscar hollered every time got too close. Bright, blinking tree,
dream seed stories falling with murmured voices down the stairs.

My wife next door drinking. The other wives' husbands gone.
This house full of kids, some of them mine, all of them, now sleeping,
their dreams seeded with stories told with murmured voices.
My brother-in-law's voice crosses the continent, his pride bright on the line,

this house full of kids, some of them mine, all of them, now sleeping
through their cousin's arrival, *she was born at 11:30, her name is Fallon Elizabeth.*
From across the continent, my brother-in-law, becoming a father on the line,
my wife next door drinking wine with the wives—their husbands out the chain hunting caribou.

My niece, Fallon born minutes before midnight
a voice reaches across this state as big as a continent, into the line next door, a father
a caribou hunter, says goodnight. Drinking wine next door his wife
tells him, *kill something tomorrow for me, babe.* Adak and Juneau a whisper away.

Ragged, Loved

1

Though we knew little
of Oscar Jasper Brenton; encyclopedia
salesman, seasonal gypsy of the Midwest territory, a drunk, womanizer, loved
by his sons who fished every muddy river from Iron Mountain to Oshkosh,
trout lines and Kiekhaefer Mercury outboards,
we named our second son after him and some Dubliner.
Oscar Wilde Lamb, the shock and the joy of his arrival. Windows drawn December dark
by early afternoon, steamed on the inside, kettle breathing on the woodstove.
Our first son, Finn, glowing, ski-tired, held out the handmade card
toward the tub, his brother's hot body bloomed into winter.

2

At age two now, Oscar, the finally sleeping child,
warm and blanketed deep on couch
Jack-in-the-boxes when the movie ends.
Credits roll and dance party exit music has his mom
and brother shaking it on the living room rug. I'm numb
and dumb and nearing peace, but now he's up, eyes closed, he's whip and nae-naeing, bop
and stanky-legging, his lips moving but in a rare
moment, he's quiet. Lip-syncing, ooh watch me,
watch me. And then zombie arms reaching,
sightless but sensing mom's proximity. TV off now,
mom scoops sleep dancer, we all ascend stairs, slowly, ragged, bedways.

3

Oscar insists the second-hand, mangled book is not a Pirate's Log
but a secret journal for summer adventures to faraway worlds—
Haines, Glacier Bay and the Yukon. Forget the pirate name generator
he demands we get down to the business, dictates *Day 1: Epic Jousting*.
Begin with inflatable weapons, boxer's headgear and his older brother balanced
on wobbly pedestals. In the inflatable ring, a moment of kindness makes them equally matched,
round after round they batter brother heads but do not break. They are five and ten and knock
me sideways daily. I stand smiling as they attack. For a moment, maybe I'm not even on edge.
For now the brother battle is all tied up, two knockdowns a piece. At the strong man
game the barker calls *seven ding eight ding nine*. The boys swing, laugh and scream, cheer
the strongman swinging a sledge, pounding the earth to raise a tiny steel ball, hoping to ring song
from bronze bell. Three thousand days as a parent. Tiny triumphs crystalize and blur.

Ball Jar

Drawers, jars, racks
hands and fingers,
lid, mouth, lip, metal.

Seals and countertops,
clank, song, glass,
empty vessel and its dreams.

Full dreams, half-full dreams,
fresh, rancid, crisp
cucumber, vinegar, pickle.

Lid off, summer in.
Dirt, peat and seaweed in.
Water too, from rain, from well
in jar, in radish and beet,
cabbage and purple carrot,
all of it in, seed, root, stalk
and greens, all in.

Midnight sun, salmon,
memory, rain music on roof
also in, poems too,
pickled for later.

Vinegar and pressure,
gasket rubber, red as beet
stain on handling hand.

Dill, salt, turmeric,
little jars, red lids,
green labels.

Drawer full of herbs
in jars, selfish jars,
secreted fragrances,
flowers from far away.

Autumn sea of purple
crocuses opening, harvested
and dried in dog day sun,
from the flowers, glean saffron
threads to scent and color cream,
savory curry sauce sweet on tongue.

A tall black beer poured
from bottle to pint jar
to mouth.

A candle in a jar
softly smoking light inside,
wax run, wick, a room,
less dark.

Dinner and done,
beer and bottle and jar
empty, a different drawer,
containers for leftovers,
jars, like bass
smallmouth, largemouth,
one once for peanut butter,
another, for peonies at Easter,
tomato sauce, couscous,
an ounce of mouth-watering
marijuana.

Jars for today,
jars for tomorrow,
places for poems
to age, savor and save.

Kaldūnai

Three, one, one,
says my Mom,

guiding me though
I'm in a different kitchen
now and on my own.

Three cups flour,
one cup water,
one egg.

Knead together
adding water
one tablespoon
at a time.

Don't let it get
too sticky.

Roll the dough
until an eighth of an inch
thick and cut

into rounds using the rim
of a small juice glass.

Put on a large pot to boil
and sauté three to four cups
of mushrooms in butter.

Look for wild varieties
at the market, if available
or better yet go into the forest.

Look for the *baravykas*— king bolete
voveraitė— little squirrel
or *lepeška*— yellow chanterelle.

Pretend it's midsummer in Lithuania
nearing *Rasos*— the dew holiday.
You are dressed in hand woven linen,

draped in a sash ending in tassels.

Kneeling to pick mushrooms,
your ancestors swarm and braid
through Poplars.

Into moonlit meadow
wearing garlands of wildflowers,
eating cucumbers dipped in honey.

A bonfire and *kupole*—maypole await,
dancing and drinking *Krupnikas*— [honey liqueur]
smaller fires flank the flurry of swirling white linen,
guide the rising sun home to the shores of the Baltic.

Imagine it is morning now,
Jonines—St. John's Day,
your name day, the dew heavy
on wheat fields, frogs and belladonna.

Imagine you are reborn
in a different time, on a different shore.
Your dead grandparents and this old world
are not dead, are not torn by war.

Lietuva and *Mociute* and *Tevukas* [Lithuania, Grandmother, Grandfather]
are alive and their world is new,
is fresh, like these mushrooms,
these fragments of a language
opened up like a paper-wrapped gift.

The bite of horseradish
and pickled whitefish,
memories of the nose,
the mysterious *Kucious*— Christmas feast
spread out on a linen tablecloth.

Next to the laden table,
on the dining room wall, a painting
of the farm and pasture that was their home

a time before the wars.
Before the Germans

and the Russians,
before my Mother
and Father. Before me.

But remember
the mushrooms
the *baravykas*,
voveraitė and *lepeška*.

Place your treasures
in a paper sack.

Or better yet, wrap them in a handkerchief
that used to belong to *Tevukas*.

Drop in the *kaldūnai*
one by one, stirring
so the dough doesn't stick
to the bottom of the big pot
breathing steam up into your face
and filling the kitchen
with so much more.

From the small radio in the breakfast
room WJCU Cleveland plays Lithuanian
news and Strauss through soft static.

We called it the breakfast room
just large enough for the table, six chairs
and little else but the stand on which sat the radio
bringing a distant world into ours.

How often I snuck cookies
from the cool ceramic belly
of the Cheshire cat cookie jar
when *Mociute* turned to the stove.

I sat in a chrome-legged stool with black vinyl seat
in her kitchen, listening carefully, when my siblings wouldn't.

Even through heavy accents and broken
English, her stories kept me close while she cooked.

I listened and I watched and I hope
she will someday forgive me,
from her place in *dangu*, for making *kaldūnai*
for a Russian potluck and for calling them *palmeni*.

Dangu: heaven

Kaldūnai: dumpling, Lithuanian

Palmeni: dumpling, Russian

Exposure

Our hundred-year-old house leans toward what openings
can be found between adjacent structures stacked three-deep, rising
up the steep hillside from the sea.

Our house is level but not plumb. Its cedar skin sheds
paint, has waited years for some loving touch, to be scraped, to be painted.
We hope the next sunny days might warm the wood enough to dry the perpetual damp.

We cross our fingers for one good summer in five to run the power washer and go up
on the roof and nail down new zinc strips, keep the moss at bay. Exposure
wears on this broken-down house, this life on the cold, remote coast, everything leaning

south for good exposure. But the storms roll in that way too, Taku winds bombard
while we lean in, long for the sun's soft touch instead of gut-punch gale. At three
in the afternoon the house is a lantern in the December dark, the glowing windows a wash

of amber light. Despite renovation, inside we fight the chill, draw blinds to hide
the drizzle that blurs the windows, refuses to freeze. We teach our kids to tent the kindling
in the woodstove, strike the match, make a fire. By warm lamp light we play rummy, listen

to news on the radio and worry after faraway friends occupying other cold coasts,
in Norway, Antarctica. Wonder what they turn to for shelter against exposure, what light
sustains them. From what darkness and doubt their storms are born?

A Roof

I finish the new deck roof,
rough-cut yellow cedar
under clear polycarbonate panels
so I can watch the falls
of Mt. Juneau, grill salmon
out of the rain.
All night, sky unloads, wind
gusts forty, tests the work of my hands,
my calculating mind.

Under cover
of sleep's light roof
 and heavy clouds,
 I wake and roll
 each time the tired chimney braces,
 against the heart of this house,
 an uneasy song of joists & stair stringers flexing.

I turn from window draft,
 toward bed's warm center,
 doubt my efforts,
certain my shoring up
 of this old shingled ship,
 will founder.

I try to hold together
 my thoughts, my breath.
 Hoping it might be enough
 to keep this house, this family, this life,
 sheltered & sturdy.

I sweat through sheets,
 am as tired as
 the flags atop the Capitol
 are wind-thinned.

Wind chime, in the bare lilac branches,
 swirls in each gust, rings out,
 at this hour, in this storm, it's song
 is not soothing.

I doubt these hands, this house,
 this life, yet the storm blows North,

somehow the center holds.

Day is a brightening room, and breakfast,
 bagels and eggs for my boys,
 they eat, tell me thanks, even.
The espresso roast I grind and brew is dark and delicate.

I step out the back door to confirm
 the roof has held.
The night's rain and wind are a dream
 that I'll forget once I leave the house.

Brassica Oleracea

1

Brussels sprout, *Brassica oleracea*—
wild cabbage I could never stomach
until my two-year-old son,
Oscar Wilde, demanded *more*
Brussels, Dad.

A snack time experiment
I roasted the tender buds
in our ornery oven
halved with a paring knife
lightly oiled and salted
,

2

Four now, Oscar smirks
through a mouthful of soft, toasted sprouts
whenever I make them. Always wants to help cut
them up, small hands, small knife
dash the salt, open the oven.

Remember Dad,
how I teached you to love
Brussels?

3

After dinner we pop
the top of the steamy
seed-starter box.

See those sprouts? I ask
our faces come so close
I can smell Brussels on his breath.

Are those gonna grow into big Brussels?
His widening pupils are wild
cabbages blooming.

4

I remember the freezer burned
green giant smiling on the bagged
beans and broccoli growing
hoar frost in the freezer
how they went limp

in the steamer.

Never, I tell Oscar;
that's how many times
I ate Brussels sprouts
before now.

Nothing so savory, tender
and buttery as these Brussels sprout
buds came from my childhood kitchen.

5

All summer we water
and watch the violet heads unfold
bolt upright, the thick stalks
begin to speckle with buds.

Oscar's small hands aren't strong
enough yet to pinch and twist the sprouts
from the stalks, he races toward the house
I'm going to get a knife, Dad, be right back.

Just wait, I tell him. *They'll come
off easy when they're ready.* We wait
weed the rows, pull carrots, can sense
by their thickness, that fall is near.

As the nights cool and the wind picks up,
we uncover the garden for the harvest—
only the kale is tough enough for what's coming.
Brussels sprouts surrender to our fingers

bounty plunked into the colander.
Before we take them inside to roast
we tarp over the tilled soil, tie down
what is light, until snow sets its wet anchor.

Fear of Rejection

Breathing is optional
while dreaming. Waking is necessary, not real
waking but opening lithium heavy eyes
onto awareness of the dream, some familiarity, recognition
that because there are more donors than pulmonologists on the planet,
it is only a dream, a thing that can be rejected.

God is on one side of a curtain or maybe it's two-way glass
and all dreams are made of the same material.

Waking while dreaming doesn't shatter
white tiled lab in a hospital wing where everyone is hanging
on hope, fearing rejection, shatter resistant, refusing
to wake, dreaming that the lab coats tend
to disembodied lungs here,
in gardens, hydroponics of course, dirt
is unsterile, soil is dry in dreams, desert dry
& cactus flowers grow & look like lungs
somehow slipped from cage of ribs into glass
terrarium.

Roots in fluid sway unrooted, in suspension, bronchioles,
florets, immunosuppressants, lung tissue.

The synthetic heart is vital to circulation,
the aquarium glass, the lavender soap, the lab coats
merely minimize exposures. Procure premium donors,
garden heirloom varieties, organs, body parts, part of this dream.
Hold out a little longer, steady now, diffusion of oxygen
through alveolar wall, microscopic divide between life
& dream & an engineered lung longing to be real
to be filled with warm, heart pumped blood.

Outside of these sterile labs, beyond swinging
doors in the dirty world, waiting with canned oxygen,
considering when we might opt-out of waking until new
parts are ripe & ready for harvest.

Rounding Outer Point, Douglas Island

We were all more or less
 falling. And that's all we wanted.

So much gravity leaning
 hard against these scaffolds of bone

 and how they refused to break or bend,
or become holy or hollow enough

to fall with grace, sway
 of a swell-tossed boat, swamped

 and each time rising from trough
to peak, arc and fall, soaked and salted

seething and alive.

On the Move

Through morning,
aspen's silver seashells still.

Animals moving,
Fleet with fear, supple, strong.

Man, moose and beaver.
So much more than heartbeats complicated.

Heron wings toss light,
beak extracts eel from lake shallows.

Mallard moves water,
kicks ripples, ripples sky.

Forest canopy leans lakewards,
leaf-shadows walk on water.

Beaver brings down birch,
builds den, a between place.

Den hovers, floats, full of food,
refusing pond and shore and winter.

Beaver will fight for kits, kill
swimming dogs fetching thrown sticks.

Anything I can put ketchup on

To call them berries
really is blasphemy—
too bitter without
help of cinnamon, cloves, molasses.

These cranberries
hanging in frosted bunches
bagged to be boiled
milled and canned.

This collecting,
this pushing through dense brush
down grown over logging roads,
and this speaking of the words
hey
and
bear.

This balancing act
of supermarket and
backyard.
These berries,
this ketchup
they became.

This hunger
for anything I can put ketchup on.

Feared and Afraid

Bear is bear, man
longs to return to animal
self, to wake lean muscle,
and remember a time when to run
meant to survive.

Forest is forest, bear longs
to be bear, gorging on dandelion
greens in the cool alder shade,
nosing cubs to nurse, or steering
them to safety of higher trees
each time jet engines thrust
on a nearby runway, aluminum skin
reflecting fish scales of sun.

Summer's first salmonberries
collect in paws and hands alike,
cubs and kids yawn, paved ways braid
through what remains of wild
spaces, our circles and territories intersect.
Probability and logic, two legs or four.
They eat and are eaten.

Man runs nightly through never night
of Anchorage summer, wilderness pushes
back against the order of the city,
against the food chain.

Bear eats, man eats,
bear kills man kills bear.
They are feared and afraid.
At the center of both,
salmon and berries.

Killing Cold

My cat, Zeus does not mind a New Year's arrival though despises the fireworks
signaling some newness, some beginning in the foggy night, too warm
for January in Alaska, for cats, dogs or other fur bearing mammals.

Bombogenesis, Fire and Fury, glare ice on the Kuskokwim, open water, five survivors, father
fallen, gone under, fished out of the river with hooks on New Year's Day
& in Florida, iguanas fall from night roosts, flash frozen, though likely, as they warm up

to come back to life. Thresher sharks turned sharksicles
littered Cape Cod beaches. This new year too cold for the cold-blooded, though just
right for killing invasive species; Burmese pythons in South Florida, two homeless Houston men.

Rise

To get out
 of the deep, first
go down-

work that furious club-tail
through tunnel twists,
down, then up, then out.

Out of the deep-den,
 beaver through waking,
through mist music,
light deep like black spruce
down at roots but rising.

Brittle sap floored-forest,
so many needles dropping,
daylight falling but trapped
in drooping night-net.

Rise, emerge,
 from den
and water warp, where sight
swarms, blurry forest and fractured light
 come into focus,
 membranous inner-eyelids
 lift.

Swim beaver, wet still,
become day, walk now,
spit spruce sap, build.

Half-Life

after Inger Christensen's *Alphabet*
"cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum."

0

1

Absolute, tender lead type, rigid steel press allowing all this storied longing.

1

Arabic, Akkadian, Aramaic, English. Affinity, likeness and attachment.

2

Before sight, before blackberries, before poetry.
Before *before*.

3

Cicadas exist, of course
their song, their center,
thrushing summer heart.

5

December approaches, early dusk, dogs flush late
departing geese, eruption of honk and wing, divided sky.
Darkness and delicate mathematics, of decimals.
Diurnal rhythms, deeply dependent on daylight, its dialect of minutes, hours, longitude.
Divided, to go with the dark or the light, to make music or meaning?

8

Experiments exist; elk and rare earth elements;
Einsteinium exists, elk eat and are eaten,
their lives are full, not half, not volatile, decay
exists, decomposition, dogs and Dodges, rusting rails and free electrons.
Influence; magnetic fields and full hips, curve
each mountain pass, each watershed, each isotope
a carefully curving signature, place, name, coordinates
enter into alphabets, lists of the lost.

13

Fibonacci exists, dreaming in Arabic, in Pisa,
its tower not yet tilted, foundation yet to fail, Leonardo
finding spirals everywhere, ferns, pine cones, snails,
algorithms and ribbons
and finally, his Liber Abaci.

Families exist and rabbits and reproduction
& numeric place value exists, as does interest
and compounding debt and sediment.

Tectonic plates and subduction and magma exist, burden of geology, burden exists
foundations fail. Materials may be engineered, given limits
hearing fails, hearts too and dogs, dogs fail
friendships exist, humans are animals and dogs dream.
When they fail, their humans hurt. Each one twice as hard to lose as the last.

8

Great friendships exist
good dog, good dog,
grateful human, grateful human.
Animal speech exists, years exist,
so many good days compounded, emotion and mileage.
Good belly rubs and that spot just beneath the collar,
when scratched, dog smile spreads, parietal plates spread,
good dog.

5

God-given years, the flat world, given shaped by
friendship, frequency of seasons and cicadas and emergence.
Every seventeen years, or is it eleven? However
erratic, each nymph, each pup, eventually
decays.

3

Dogs, deliverance.
Care and feeding. Breakup and
brothers and ice and bridges.

2

Brittle salmon bones in the wrack line. Brevity and breathlessness,
brooding but not broadsided.

1
Alone but

1
alive.

0